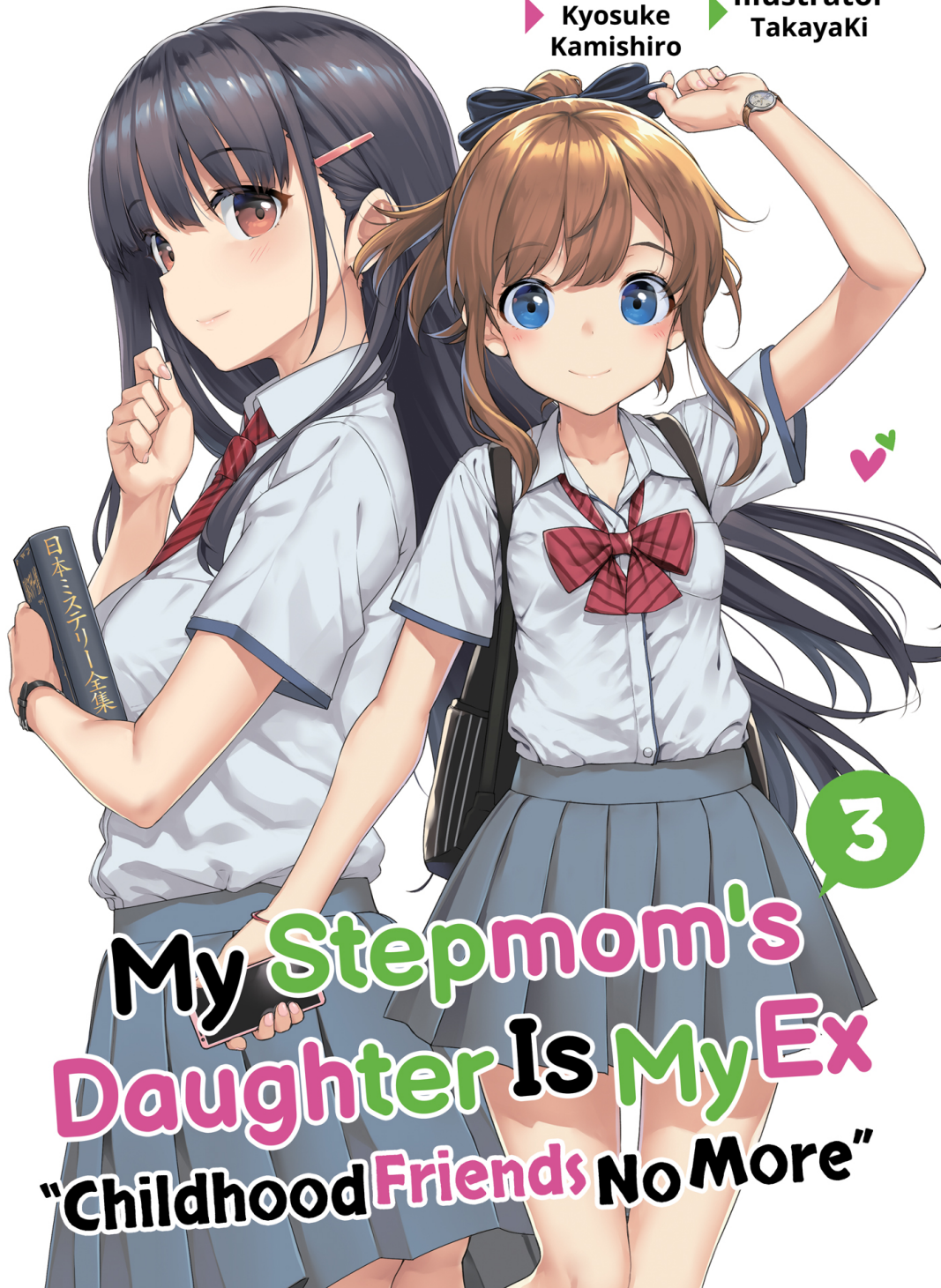


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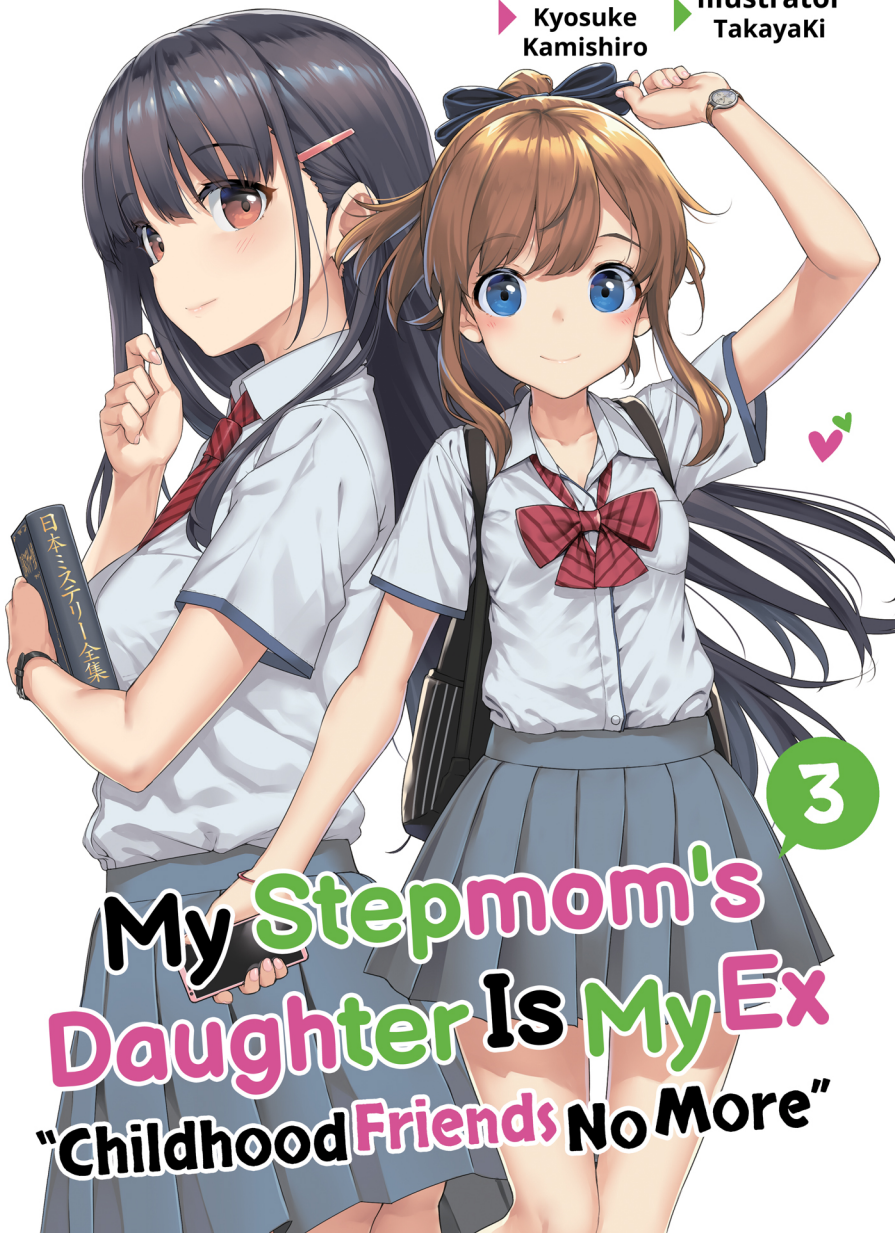


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A Day in the Life of the Ex-Couple

An Invader in the Midst of a Storm

The storm raged outside.

“All the trains have stopped, so I don’t think we can come back tonight. I did manage to meet up with Yuni-san, so—”

“Happy house-sitting with Yume, Mizuto-kun!”

I replied with an “okay” before hanging up the phone. I peeked outside at our yard and was met with the sight of rain pelting our windows.

We were more than halfway into June. As we drew ever closer to summer, we also drew closer to the typhoon season. Today’s storm was at least considerate enough to have started its torrential pouring after school and work hours. One moment everything had seemed normal, but in the blink of an eye, everybody was confined indoors.

“So?” my little stepsister asked. “Can they get back?”

“Nope,” I said without turning to face her. “They’re staying the night in a hotel, so they won’t be back till tomorrow.”

The sound of the rain pounding our home reverberated across the living room in which we were the only occupants. In fact, we were the *only* ones in the whole house, meaning that we had to somehow ride out the night. *Alone*.

“So, uhhh... How ’bout we start on dinner?” I suggested. “What do we have in the fridge?”

“Hm, I think we have some frozen foods.” She paused. “Oh, I should make rice.”

What? Are you surprised we’re not freaking out after realizing that it’s just the two of us for an entire night? Well, we’ve been living together for about three months, and during that time, there’ve been countless situations in which we’ve been left home alone. True, this may have been the first time that we were alone overnight, but it would be nothing more than an extension of the times we’ve been left alone before.

Humans learn and grow from their experiences. This trifling situation was nothing to us...or so I thought.

After we finished dinner, took our baths, and went to our separate rooms, I heard a high-pitched shriek from Yume’s room.

Hm, is someone dying in there? I furrowed my brow and left my room to figure out what she was freaking out about in the middle of

the night. The second I opened my door, a long-haired specter immediately jumped onto me.

I yelped, thinking I was under attack by Sadako, but no, it was just my little stepsister. As she pressed her face into my shoulder, I did my best to try and ignore the floral smell from her long black hair, which was tied into two low pigtails.

“Wh-What happened?” I asked her in a calm, cool, and collected voice. Yume pointed towards her door, her entire body trembling.

“I-It... It’s...”

“Does ‘it’ have a name?”

How was I supposed to know what she was talking about if she wouldn’t say what it was? For all I knew, it could have been Voldemort, but a quick glance into her room was enough to tell me that wasn’t the case.

My eyes landed on her carpet and that’s where I saw it-which-must-not-be-named. A small effigy of darkness that could move at unimaginable speeds.

“D-Do something! Bug spray! Where is it?!”

My mind raced as I went through the various options, trying to find the best one as quickly as possible. As soon as the answer dawned on me, I slowly approached the open door, clasped my fingers around the handle, and...slammed it shut, sealing the danger in there.

“Seal complete,” I said, slowly putting distance between me and the door.

“You sealed it in *my* room!” She shot me a glare as she jolted back. “Don’t tell me you’re scared of bugs.”

“I suppose that’s one way to put it.”

“That’s the *only* way to put it! Aren’t you embarrassed?! I could’ve loved you for a hundred years, and this would’ve been enough to kill our relationship.”

“Well, you were only into me for a year at most—a far cry from a hundred years—and it’s already dead.”

We retreated to my room, Yume firmly clinging to my arm every step of the way, in order to strategize our next steps.

“Whatever! Just get the bug spray! I don’t know where it is!”

“Yeah, and if I do that, you’ll make *me* kill it. God, why is it that you only play the damsel in distress at times like these? Pisses me off!”

“It’s better than being a wimpy guy!”

Either way though, I had no choice but to go get the bug spray from downstairs. As expected, when I came back up, Yume hid behind me and mumbled, “All you.” *Dammit, I usually leave this stuff to dad. Why does he have to be gone today of all days?!*

I steeled myself, gripped the can, and opened the door to Yume’s

room. As I peered inside, I focused on the area of the carpet where I'd seen it last, and then ran my eyes across the floor. Even though Yume had a lot of books, her room was tidy. So, unlike me, she didn't have lots of clutter across the floor. Instead, her collection of books (in the triple digits) were neatly packed into bookshelves or boxes. That should have created a situation where there were no blind spots, but...

"I don't know where it went." It appeared that it'd concealed its disgusting self from us. "Okay, we have no choice but to try a saturation attack. We'll use a bug bomb and give it no place to escape."

"Wait, then where am I supposed to sleep?"

"How about in our parents' room?"

"Huh?! You're saying I should sleep in a married couple's bed?!"

Honestly, that hadn't crossed my mind. I'd just figured that she wouldn't mind sleeping in her mom's bed.

"Fine, then what about the couch?"

"No."

"Okay... Then *I'll* sleep on the couch, and you can sleep in my—"

"No," she flatly refused while gripping the sleeve of my pajamas.

"I don't know what I'll do if that thing pops up again."

I wondered what the heck she expected me to do when we'd *both* be frozen in fear. There'd be nothing *to* do. *Is she stupid?*

After placing the bug bomb in her room, I finished off the seal by spraying the space underneath the door. Fortunately, she didn't have a computer in her room, or else I would've had to go in and move it.

"Now it has nowhere to run. No way it'll survive this."

"Don't jinx it—now it's definitely gonna live."

"Dang."

After our exchange, we headed back to my room. As Yume carefully waded through the sea of books strewn across my floor, I could see that she was making a difficult face.

"Why did it show up in *my* room when *your* room is so much dirtier?"

"Maybe it's 'cause I ventilate my room in the winter. There's no way for their eggs to survive when my room gets that cold." I paused, remembering something. "Oh yeah, I guess your room used to be empty, so we never aired it out or anything."

"Argh, god!" she growled before angrily plopping on my bed.

Her pigtails, which were held together by white scrunchies, rested on her pajama-clad chest. Regrettably, this was a very nostalgic sight for me, so maybe that's why an unexpected question escaped my lips.

"Are you serious right now?"

"What are you so worried about?" she asked, leering at me. "Are

you *that* worried that you can't keep your hands to yourself?" Yume leaned back, hands on my bed, like she wasn't worried about anything at all. The only protection she had were the thin pajamas she was wearing.

She'd only ever dressed this way in front of her family and her ex-boyfriend—aka me. She must've been pretty courageous to boldly flaunt her chest like this.

Does she wear a bra to bed? No, scratch that. I needed to seal intrusive thoughts like that away just like the bug. I had to be courageous *and* rational in turn.

"I'm not worried about anything."

"Hmph. Of course you aren't. You *are* the same guy who didn't make a single move on your girlfriend in middle school."

"Cram it."



I put one knee on the edge of the bed and flipped the blanket over.

“There you go.”

“I’m sleeping...next to the wall?”

“Yeah. Problem?”

“No... That’s fine.”

It wasn’t until Yume restlessly crawled onto her side of the bed that I realized all too late that she effectively had no way to escape. But it was unlikely that she’d *need* to escape so there shouldn’t be a problem.

After she settled in and faced the wall, I entered my side of the bed and used the remote to turn off the lights. Suddenly, darkness filled my eyes, the sound of breathing reverberated in my ears, and I could feel a warmth on my back as I lay on my side.

As much as I wanted to naturally distance myself, I almost fell off the bed trying to do so. I backed away from the edge, and my derriere was met with something soft, prompting me to reflexively move away again.

My range of movement was very limited; moving my legs even a little had me brushing up against her smooth calf. Every time I encountered it, I would freak out and pull away, end up touching it again, pull away, over and over again. In the end, I gave up and let it happen—but just with my heel.

I knew that if I left the situation unattended, she’d shift positions, and her foot would end up on top of mine. Of course, that was unacceptable, so I shifted my position, and in retaliation, she fought back by sandwiching my foot in between both of hers.

In an attempt to break free, I used my big toe to poke at the back of her foot, but she fought back by doing the same thing. After enough poking, she wedged her big toe between two of mine. *Ouch*. So I squeezed her toe with all my might. That’s when our hands came into play.

At first, I wasn’t sure what to do when she shoved her hand against my back, but I ended up grabbing it and rolled over. I pushed my fingers in between hers and clenched them. We ended in a stalemate with both of our fingers sandwiched in between one another’s.

Suddenly, the raging storm outside didn’t sound loud at all. It was physically impossible for either dad or Yuni-san to come home today. No matter what we did here, there was no way for our parents to know.

Wait, “no matter what we did”? What was I thinking? This must be the fatigue talking. That *had* to be it. In the first place, the piece of

furniture known as “the bed” had no other use besides sleeping. *Only* sleeping. Nothing else.

So, in this house that was currently only occupied by the two of us for the entire night with no chance of anyone else coming in, there was absolutely—and I mean *absolutely*—nothing for me to be considering.

As I was thinking that, I felt two arms strongly embrace me from behind, making me jump a little. As I looked down, I confirmed that there were certainly two arms protruding from under my armpits and wrapped around my chest. On my back, I could feel a soft sensation separated from me by a thin cloth, and accompanying all of this was a hot breath on my neck.

There’s no way this is actually happening. You were the one who was against this. You provoked me, and now you’re doing this?! My ears were filled with the pounding of a heart. At this point, it was hard to tell if it was mine or hers.

Oh no. Not good. I need to hold back. I tried to press my hand against my heart to calm it, but her hand was already there. I had no choice; I turned to face her.

“H-Hey...” Yume started, her voice shaking. “D-Did you hear something?”

“Huh?” I focused on my hearing, and that’s when I heard *something*.

Suddenly, it was like a bucket of cold water had been dumped on me. Now my heart was racing for a completely different reason. *Was the seal too weak?!*

“G-Get the lights!” she shouted.

“I know!”

I flipped the lights back on with the remote by my pillow and scanned the room. Then, I saw a shadow of darkness between a pile of books on the floor.

The two of us screamed in unison. *Dammit! How dare you?!*

“Bug spray! Use the bug spray!” Yume cried as she clung to my back.

Dammit, I can’t move like this. Does the “fight” option not exist for you in these situations? Fortunately, I’d had the foresight to bring the bug spray with me, just in case. But I had so much crap in my room that if I lost track of the creature, there was little hope that I’d be able to find it again.

“I just gotta go for it!”

I stepped off my bed, spray can in hand, and slowly approached it, doing my best not to scare it off. Unfortunately, it somehow sensed the danger it was in, and just as I was about to pull the trigger, it ran off.

“Oh no you don’t!”

My reflexes at that moment should go in the book of world records. I immediately shot the spray straight into its path with an accuracy that pro gamers would applaud. The spray made contact with the shadow, immediately stopping its movement. Even after it had stopped moving, I continued to spray and spray.

“Ew, it’s still alive.” I shuddered.

God, it’s, like, super gross. Ew, I can’t even right now. Though my disgust for this organism was evoking a high school girl’s thought pattern, I continued to spray it, making sure to kill it at least a hundred times over. I wondered if this was how a big bad feels, killing the protag over and over again. I kinda wanted to throw out some insults even.

After a few dozen seconds had passed, Yume called out from behind me. “Is it dead?”

“Probably...”

I had a feeling that if I gave her a definite answer, it’d somehow come back to life. What was this organism? Was it the kind of boss that had different phases?

Sure, it was dead, but I still had to dispose of it. I covered its body with a tissue—kind of like what people do for corpses—scooped it up with a dustpan, and then put it inside several plastic bags. This time, it was perfect.

Yume let out a deep sigh of relief as she saw me tie up the outer plastic bag.

“Hey, you just gonna sit there?”

“Wh-What’s wrong with that?” She huffed. “This is probably the only kind of situation I’ll ever rely on you in.”

“What am I, an exterminator?” I let out a heavy sigh.

“Thanks...” Yume said guiltily.

“Oh, *now* you thank me?”

“Wh-What does it matter when I thank you?! Be grateful!”

I scoffed in response.

“Now that it’s dead, I have no reason to be here anymore. I’ll just air out my room and—”

“In the middle of a typhoon?”

She didn’t respond.

The sound of rain pelting the window once again filled the room. Though she may have been able to get rid of the fumes from the bug bomb if she opened her window, she’d also have a good amount of water fill her room—a room packed with books.

“Plus, you know what they say: if you see one, there’s bound to be thirty more behind it. It’s better to wait for the bug bomb to do its job.”

“Well, it is what it is, I guess...” Yume averted her gaze from mine.
“Just for today.”

“Where’s my ‘thank you’?”

“Shut up! You should be thanking me!”

When morning came, the sound of rain and wind had both disappeared, and in its place was the soft sound of breathing. In my half-asleep state, I turned to face the source of the sound out of reflex, and my eyes were filled with the sight of a cute girl with long eyelashes, fast asleep.

When was the last time I saw your face this closely? You’ve always had such nice facial features, but no matter how many times I told you that, you’d never believe it yourself. And now you try to play the role of a perfect, beautiful, and intelligent superhuman. For god’s sake...

I moved her bangs to the side so I could see her face better. *It’s okay if you at least show me what you really look like, right, Ayai?* Her warm breath brushed against my lips.

Then I heard a sound and a current of electricity ran through my body, making me jump. *Oh no, was that— More importantly, what the heck was I just trying to do?!* Just as my slowly booting-up head started to overheat, Yume, who was supposed to be asleep, jumped up and grabbed me.

“Ah!” she yelped.

“Huh?”

I heard the sound again, so I turned around to the source and saw that a few of my school papers had fallen to the ground. *So that’s what it was.* Then the real problem I needed to focus on was the girl who currently had her head burrowed into my chest.

“H-Have you...”

She said nothing.

“Have you been awake this entire time?”

Still nothing.

Had she caught on? Did she know what I had tried to do while I was half-asleep? Yume continued to keep her head against me, hiding her face.

“No comment. I have nothing to say to a guy who would try to kiss a sleeping girl.”

“If you knew, then—”

“What time is it?!” Yume suddenly shouted, let go of me, and jumped off the bed. “We’re gonna be late if we keep dawdling! The typhoon’s obviously gone by now.” She dashed out of the room, not letting me get a single word in.

I stared at the now closed door and muttered, “If you knew, then...” *You could have at least tried to move away.*

Those last words never left my mouth and instead slowly passed,
just like the storm.

Isana Higashira Comes Over

“What are you so wary of?”

In what could only be described as a folly of youth, I had a so-called girlfriend during eighth and ninth grade. How was it that the two of us “eternally single” types ended up getting together? Clearly, there were invisible strings in the form of a shared interest that tied us together.

The shared interest we had was the greatest invention of humanity—the crowning achievement of humans and the very foundation that civilized society was built on. Books. The act of reading is by nature a single-player adventure, but because we shared this hobby, we were drawn to one another. I won’t try to argue about whether that was a good or bad thing. I just want to make clear the simple cause-and-effect of how we ended up dating.

We exchanged our thoughts on books we’d read and asked each other about books we hadn’t read. Then we’d lend each other books from our collections. Truth be told, even though our status changed from being in a relationship to being stepsiblings, this little connection of ours continued to this day.

However, if there was one difference I could point to, it’d be the fact that now we’d argue about books we’d both read and then complain about books we hadn’t read. Then we’d disparage each other whenever one of us borrowed books without asking.

With that in mind, it’s safe to say that our current relationship was that of fellow readers. We had absolutely no reservations about throwing our opinions at each other, which I guess could be considered an improvement for us, but I digress.

Back then, being able to borrow books had been very important to middle schoolers like us who didn’t have any money to buy them. Not only could we read books for free, we’d be reading a book that the other had read, which was a very important factor. It was more enjoyable that way, and it meant that we could have proper conversations regarding our impressions and thoughts on each book. It was really like killing two birds with one stone because to us, books were a better tool of communication than social media.

For example, there was this one conversation we had while walking around a secondhand bookstore when she was still Yume Ayai.

"I actually have the entire collection at my place," I said during her search for a certain mystery series.

"Really?"

"Yeah, so if you'd like, I could lend them to you..."

"Thanks! I haven't been able to find them anywhere."

"All right then, wanna come over?" I asked without even thinking of the implication.

"Huh?" Ayai suddenly froze as stiff as a board. "B-By come over, you mean to your house?"

"Hm? Yeah."

"U-Uh, um..." She looked at the ground and tugged at her bangs.

Finally, my foolishness dawned on me. I'd just invited a girl over to my house.

"O-Oh, uh..."

"U-Um..."

The narrow aisle of the secondhand bookstore was consequently filled with the trivial sounds of a boy and a girl fumbling to find the right words to say. This uncomfortable situation lasted for over a minute before finally we glanced at each other and exchanged polite smiles.

"H-How about I just bring them to school tomorrow?"

"Y-Yeah. Th-Thanks."

I'll be the first to admit that spending time in the same room with Yume Ayai while talking about nothing in particular would have been a fun time. However, there was a reason we were both hesitant to be in the same room at my house. It was because we were dating.

Being alone together in the same room has a different meaning when you're dating. If we hadn't been together though, maybe I would've had a friend who I could actually talk to about books—my first true friend in middle school. Sometimes I wondered if maybe it would've been better if we'd just stayed friends, and I continued to wonder about that until I met Isana Higashira.



"I would like to browse your personal book collection, Mizuto-kun," my friend Isana Higashira said as we sat in our usual spot in the library. It was totally out of the blue but calm and casual.

"Huh? My personal book collection?"

"Consider this: I have been rejected by you, correct?"

"Wow, you're bringing that up yourself?"

"Since I have been rejected, the logical assumption is that you have no romantic feelings for me. Therefore, if I—a female—were to enter your—a male's—room, there should be absolutely no problem. Wouldn't you agree?"

“I...guess?”

The way she phrased it made it difficult for me to disagree. Somehow, her words had a lot of sway to them. She may not have been the best speaker, but she was somehow still able to be very logical.

“Okay, well, wait a minute, Higashira. I’m not seeing where my book collection fits into the equation.”

“My desire to browse your collection is simply what I’d like to do. There is no particular reason; I’d just like to take a look. If I had to say, I would very much like to see what images in the light novels are the most wrinkly. It will give me insight into what heroines awoke your sexual senses in middle or even elementary school. Simple, is it not?”

“Simple? No. Why would you want that insight at all?”

“Would you not be infatuated by me being jealous?”

“Nope. Also, ‘infatuated’ is a really dated term.”

“Would my jealousy not make you horny?”

“Where did your modesty go, woman?!”

“Hm? What is so immodest about the word ‘horny’? It’s used all the time on the internet. Please explain to me what is so wrong with ‘horny.’” The large-chested dirty-joke lover Isana Higashira fluttered her eyelashes in a flirtatious manner.

“You’re somehow even more annoying than before.”

“Your disheartened face has very high value as masturbation material! I know what I will be thinking of tonight.”

“Seriously, knock it off before I stop being your friend.”

“Apologies! I was merely ribbing. I will no longer look at you indecently!” Tears began welling up in the eyes of the loner known as Isana Higashira.

While she was desperately apologizing, her self-professed “G-cup milkers” squished against my arm, most likely without her realizing. This was infinitely worse than when she had been uncomfortable with flirting.

“Yeah, I’m really not sure if I wanna let you come over. I feel like my chastity is in danger.”

“Please, rest assured. I will switch myself to post-coital clarity mode.”

“You just can’t help saying the wrong things, huh?”

“Simply put, you have the impression of someone that has very old light novels, and I’d like to go to your home and borrow some of them.”

“Old light novels? I’m not sure what’s considered ‘old’ in your world, but you were reading *Haruhi* not too long ago, right?” From our generation’s point of view, *Haruhi* would be well within the realm

of being considered “old.” I shrugged. “Well, whatever, I’m fine with you coming over, but are you sure you’re okay with it?”

“Hm?”

“You’re not worried about being alone with a guy in his room?”

“Huh?” Higashira tilted her head as if she’d heard something completely out of left field. “You just rejected me the other day. What’s there to worry about?” Her eyes sparkled with undoubting innocence.

With a face like that, I had no retaliation.

“Very intriguing. So, this is the location of your home, Mizuto-kun...as well as the location of my ‘first time.’” Higashira nervously fidgeted.

“Drop the innuendo,” I snapped in response, chopping her on the head to bring her back to her senses. *That’ll teach her to talk like that right outside my house. And I could’ve sworn she said something about “switching to post-coital clarity mode” just a bit ago. What happened to that?*

“You’ve no one to blame but yourself. You’re the one who has left me as a friend with no benefits.”

“Okay, you’re starting to make me nervous. Don’t make me get physical with you.”

“Oh my. In that case, should we stop by the convenience store? Or maybe a drug store?”

“I’m talking about physically *stopping* you!”

Ever since her confession, she’d stopped restraining herself in the least bit; it had gotten really hard to *not* be conscious of her.

“Does my mentor reside here as well?” she asked with a curious tilt of the head.

“Your what now?”

“Oh, my apologies. I’m referring to Yume-san.”

“What have you guys been up to behind my back?”

I’d already figured out that both she and Minami-san had had a hand in Higashira’s confession to me, but I didn’t know what they’d done specifically since they were so tight-lipped about it.

“Anyway,” I continued, “I don’t think she’s back yet. Usually she’s either out hanging with Minami-san, stopping by a bookstore, studying at the library, or something.”

“How unfortunate. I would’ve very much liked to observe stepsiblings in their natural habitat.”

“Don’t treat us like we’re in some kind of nature documentary.”

Yume not being home at this time of day was a blessing in disguise. Who knows how much shit she’d give me for bringing Higashira over.

Since nobody was around, I forwent announcing that I'd come home as I stepped inside.

"P-Pardon the intrusion..." Higashira said in a very soft, reserved voice, hiding behind me.

She'd probably entered shy mode due to her nervousness at visiting someone's house for the first time. I, on the other hand, was much more worried about someone seeing me bring a girl over than actually having one over.

"All right, Higashira, go on up to my room. I'll get us something to drink."

"O-Okay. I'll have apple juice."

"First time I've had such a picky guest."

Do we even have apple juice? I wondered as I opened the door to the living room, only to be met with an unexpected face.

"Huh?"

"Hm?" Yume Irido first looked at me before noticing Higashira behind me.

She looked back and forth between us over and over again until Higashira spoke up.

"Oh, so you *are* home, Yume-san. Salutations!"

"Y-Yes, hello— Wait, no!" Yume shut the door behind her in a panic, separating us from the living room. "Explain yourself! Why did you bring her here?! Didn't you *just* reject her?!" she quietly hissed at me.

"Yeah," I whispered back. "You're not wrong. It all just happened so fast."

"How are you so easily swayed by her?! Tell her to go home!"

Wait, why are we even whispering?

"Isn't that kinda rude? I know you're not a fan of her, but—"

"That's not what I mean! Our parents—"

But before she could finish, I heard two familiar voices from the other side of the living room door.

"Oh, is that you, Mizuto-kun?" Yuni-san called out.

"Hey, Mizuto," my dad quickly followed. "You could've said that you were home."

Suddenly, I was sweating bullets. It was one thing for Yume to know that I'd brought Higashira over. At the very least, she knew our situation and that our relationship was purely platonic.

But it was opening a whole other can of worms for our parents, who had absolutely no knowledge of our circumstances, to see her.

"H-Higashira! I'm really sorry, but something just came up."

"Hm?" Higashira tilted her head in confusion as I tried to push her back out the door.

But then, the living room door opened.

“Mizuto? You could at least say something... Hm?” My dad had poked his head out and got a clear view of Isana Higashira. “Hm? Hmm?! A-A girl?!” He looked at Higashira, me, and then Yume. “Is she your friend, Yume-chan? But it looks like she’s with Mizuto...” I swore I could nearly see question marks floating around him.

Dear father, is it really that hard to believe that I brought a girl home?

“U-Uh, pardon the intrusion...” Higashira said again nervously, bowing her head. “I am Mizuto-kun’s friend, Isana Higashira.”

“O-Oh, I see. You’re his friend, huh? For a second, I thought Mizuto brought home a girlfriend.”

“N-Not at all—he’s already rejected me in that regard!”

“Huh?”

Both Yume and I were frozen during this entire exchange. Before we knew it, it was all over.

“He thoroughly rejected me, so we are merely friends now. You’ve nothing to worry about!”

Thanks to Higashira’s relentless corpse-kicking, time finally started moving again.

“Y-Yuni-san!” dad shouted. “M-Mizuto...! H-He brought his ex over!”

“What?! Details!!!”

I grabbed Higashira by the arm and dragged her up the stairs to my room.

“Um, if I may...” Higashira curiously began after we’d escaped. “Why did your father assume that I’m a former partner of yours?”

“Listen...” I held my head in agony. “If someone asks if you’re seeing a guy and you reply that you’re ‘merely friends now,’ it’s normal to think that there used to be some kind of romantic involvement.”

“Oh... I see?”

“You totally don’t.” I don’t know what I’d expected. She obviously had a different idea of what was common sense.

“If this was going to end in a misunderstanding, I would have preferred for them to think I was your *current* girlfriend. It would be very helpful to my schemes.” Even though she’d hidden most of her face with the sleeves of her sweater, her eyes made it clear she was smiling.

“Plans? What plans? No, never mind. I don’t want to know.” I sighed and rested my forehead in my hand.

Speaking of the misunderstanding, maybe it was better that they thought Higashira was my ex. It’d throw them off the trail of discovering that Yume was my actual ex. This was what one would call a “false lead.” The only problem with this was that it’d be kinda

impossible to ask Higashira to pretend she was my ex.

“Wow, your room is so cluttered with books. I feel very much at peace.” In the midst of my thinking, Higashira had moved to my bookcase while avoiding the towers of books strewn across my floor. “Impressive—you’ve such a variety of genres. They say that a bookcase is a window into the soul of its owner. In your case, yours shows that you are a people pleaser.”

“Don’t accuse me like that. I’m a *nobody* pleaser.”

“You could be a one-person pleaser and simply be kind to me, and only me. I still have feelings for you, after all.”

I chose not to respond to that.

“P-Please don’t take me seriously! I-I was merely joking.”

How was I supposed to know that was a joke?! In general, I had a real problem with knowing how to interact with her sometimes, and this definitely didn’t help.

“May I browse your collection?” she said with pleading eyes.

“Just make sure you put everything back where you found it.”

“Browsing a bookcase is almost like excavating fossils. Just as there are different layers in the Earth, there are different layers to a bookcase that provide insight into the levels of knowledge of its owner. Similar to sifting through sediment, when going through a bookcase, you sift through sentiment.”

“You *really* wanted to say that last part, huh?”

While Higashira continued her “excavation” of my bookshelf, I heard a knock at the door. Initially, I was worried that it was dad, but felt immediate relief when the knocking grew violent. The only person in this household capable of that kind of violence was...*her*.

“Is knocking with your feet normal on your planet?” I asked, opening the door.

“I’m just here to stop you from doing anything indecent to Higashira-san.” Yume Irido glared at me with a surly expression.

“You really think I would do anything like that with everyone home?”

“Good point... You’d only try something when *nobody’s* around.” My shitty little stepsister shot me a smug smirk.

She must’ve been referring to when we’d been home alone during the typhoon.

I looked away, embarrassed. “Why are you here, anyway?”

“Obviously to chaperone you and make sure you don’t lay your hands on Higashira-san. You know, as her friend.”

“Uh-huh. ‘As her friend.’”

I was surprised she could call Higashira a friend so easily when she used to be just like her—struggling to determine what a friend really was and wasn’t.

“Also, I’m hiding. Our parents have a million questions, and I don’t want to answer them.” Yume let out a long, exasperated sigh.

“Ah...” *Makes sense. That’s rough.* “All right, come in. I’d rather you see how things are for yourself instead of making your own assumptions.”

Ultimately, I decided that since she’d been so refreshingly honest with me, I should try to be generous here and extend an olive branch.

“I’ll do just that.” She accepted my invitation and strode inside.

As she did, her eyes landed on Higashira, who was currently happy at work, digging through my bookshelf.

“Oh, well if it isn’t Yume-san. Have you come to *excavate* as well?”

“‘Excavate’? Are there fossils in his bookshelf?”

“Browsing a bookcase is almost like excavating fossils,” Higashira repeated. “Just as there are different layers in the Earth, there are different layers to a bookcase that provide insight into the levels of knowledge that its owner has. Similar to sifting through sediment, when going through a bookcase, you sift through sentiment.”

“You...what?”

Yume read translations of classic mysteries, so she wasn’t really well versed in wordplay. Higashira must’ve realized that what she’d said had flown over Yume’s head because her expression was filled with disappointment. *I totally get that.*

“At any rate,” Higashira continued, “Mizuto-kun has quite an enjoyable bookcase, making it a very worthwhile browsing experience! I’m so envious that you’re able to peruse this selection whenever you’d like.”

“I-I guess that’s true.”

“No, it’s not,” I interrupted. “Don’t just pop in here whenever you want. Remember when you got all red in the face because you thought a rom-com light novel was a porno?”

“Th-That was—”

“Interesting. I hadn’t realized you had such an experience. Was it possibly...this one?” Higashira pointed to one on the shelf. “Indeed, it is fairly lascivious.”

“No, not that one,” I responded. “It was much more titillating.”

“More titillating than *that?!?*!”

Thus began Higashira’s fun game of pulling light novels from my bookcase and showing their pictures to Yume.

“Feast your eyes on *this!* Is this illustration not just the pinnacle of eroticism?”

“Wh-Wh-Wha—”

I felt a little awkward as I watched two high school girls look at erotic pictures in my books, but it was also an excellent chance to

mock Yume for being innocent.

I laughed. "Pfft. What are you, a grade schooler?"

"Sh-Shut up, you closet perv!"

"True," Higashira agreed, "it is quite surprising how many erotic books are in Mizuto-kun's possession. He even has ones where the nipples are drawn."

"What? Nipples?" Yume leaned closer, curious.

"Okay, Higashira. Let's leave it at that." I grabbed Higashira's wrist as she tried to pull out another book from the back of my bookcase.

I never look at the contents of a book before buying it. I only need to look at the cover to know if I'll vibe with it. I honestly had no idea what was in that book.



“Hmph, and here I was planning to check and see if any of the illustrations were wrinkled.”

“That’s a definite no.”

“Understood.” Higashira nodded. “As a trade-off, allow me to investigate the contents of your laptop instead.”

“That’s even more of a no!”

“I give you permission to look through my tablet in exchange.”

“How desperate are you?!” *She’d really shoot herself in the foot like that?!*

“Are you two always like this? How do I put it... So open with each other?” Yume backed away from us a little bit, her gaze unwavering.

“Hmm... Yes, I’d say so. It is even normal for us to share information regarding which beauties we’d like to rub one out to.”

“Rub one out’...?” Yume tilted her head in confusion.

“Seriously, stop, Higashira. She doesn’t get that kinda stuff,” I said, covering her mouth from behind.

“Mmmffmm!” Higashira protested, wildly swinging both of her arms around, but it wasn’t too hard to keep her in check because of her weak otaku constitution.

“Hm...” Yume let out a very speculative sound that made it clear she was pouting.

“Dear me, you are quite the overprotective older brother.” Higashira exhaled deeply now that her mouth was free. “Are you aware that censorship of expression is the death of culture?”

“I was censoring *you* specifically.”

“Goodness, I was the target of your censorship? I suppose I am at fault. It was wrong of me to be born with this seductive chest of mine.”

“Please, stop! It’s seriously hard to reply when you say things like that!”

“Alas, I am unable to avoid utilizing my single redeeming point,” Higashira said, pressing her arms into her school-assigned sweater to emphasize her chest.

I was under the impression that most girls would have a complex about the size of their breasts, but maybe Higashira had just been poisoned by fiction.

“Oh.” Higashira suddenly extended her hand towards my bookshelf and pulled out a book that had an illustration on the cover, but none inside. It was a book in what’s called the “light literature” genre. “If I remember correctly, this author debuted with a light novel series.”

“Yeah... I think so.”

“I typically only check for light novel releases, so I was completely unaware of this. May I read it?”

“Go for it.”

Higashira gripped the book happily against her chest and made a sound of excitement, albeit in a monotone voice. Then, her eyes nervously darted around.

“U-Uh, may I use your bed?”

“Hm? Sure.”

Wait, what did I just agree to? Before I could think back on what I’d just said, Higashira moved to the bed that I regularly slept in.

“All right, then. Don’t mind if I do.”

I had expected her to just sit normally on the bed. Instead, she took off her socks like she often did at the library, and then laid down, stretching out her plump thighs and whimsically tapping her legs. Her arms reached towards the head of the bed as she opened up a book atop my pillow. This was the kind of relaxedness that one would have if they were in their own home. She made it seem so natural that I almost forgot that this was *my* room.

“Wait! Wh-What are you doing, Higashira-san?” Yume frantically ran over to her after seeing her actions bereft of restraint.

“Hm?”

“Y-You’re on *his* bed. You know that, right?!”

“Yes, of course I’m aware of that. Otherwise I’d have no need to ask for his permission.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Yume shifted uncomfortably. “D-Doesn’t it bother you at all?!”

“Hm? Well...” Higashira’s facial expression barely changed before she buried her face into my pillow. “I suppose my heart is racing from Mizuto-kun’s smell.”

“It is?!” I totally thought she didn’t care!

“However, that aside, I am not left with much of a choice. This is the only place I am able to read.”

“What do you mean? Aren’t you...worried at all?!”

“‘Worried?’” Higashira parroted, giving Yume the same sincere look she’d shown me at the school library. “What is there to worry about? I’ve already been rejected.”

I could tell that Yume was at a loss for words in the face of Higashira’s surprising statement.

“You get it now?” I asked, placing my hand on Yume’s shoulder.

“Huh? B-But... Um... What?” Yume was visibly confused and repeatedly looked between Higashira, who was happily reading on my bed, and me.

Higashira firmly believed that I’d never see her as a girl no matter what she did. Therefore, there was nothing holding her back in this

situation since she couldn't progress any further than the status of "friend" with me.

Honestly, she wasn't wrong in thinking that, especially since that's how I tried to interact with her. I just wanted us to be friends. I didn't want any of the gender labels to affect our relationship. So right now, all I saw was my friend I'd brought over, reading a book on my bed.

That being said, stepping back and looking at the situation kinda made me realize how absurd it was. Higashira, the person who should have been hurting the most from her confession the other day, was doing fine, but I still couldn't fully take her femininity out of the equation. I was still lagging behind her in terms of my consciousness of our relationship.

I knew that having these feelings was rude to her, especially since I'd rejected her for a really selfish reason. I knew I had no obligation to treat her like a *girl*. *I need to put in a little more effort. I should learn from her example and put that entire confession affair behind me.* What I needed to do was put more effort into being her friend and nothing else. In doing so, I would be able to show my sincerity.

"I-I can't follow this at all," Yume whispered to me. "How is she enjoying herself in your room more than my past self did?"

"Just let it be. I've decided to recognize her as a gender-neutral friend of mine. You should calm yourself down by reading."

"Okay..." Yume said, accepting a book from me before moving to the wall and sitting down.

I reached into my school bag, pulled out the book I'd been reading, and sat against my bed. For a while after that, the only sound in the room was that of pages turning.

I heard Higashira stretching on the bed behind me, prompting me to look up at the clock. It was already past six, meaning that approximately two hours had come and gone in the blink of an eye.

"That was quick. Done already?" I asked, turning around to look at Higashira, who was now flaunting her big breasts.

"Yes, and it was quite interesting! It does lose points though for its lack of illustrations depicting the naked bodies of its beautiful female characters."

"That pretty much never happens."

If I remembered right, she'd read an emotional romance novel, but I didn't see any sign of her having shed even a single tear. Higashira may have had trouble expressing her emotions, but it didn't mean she didn't express them at all. That being said, one time I had caught her staring intently at an erotic illustration of a heroine in the book she was reading, completely expressionless.

In that regard, she was the complete opposite of Yume, who'd

sometimes spoil things with her facial expressions. She'd also gasp and squeal whenever there was an unexpected twist.

"Phew, my shoulders are stiff. Please rub them, Mizuto-kun."

"No. Why?"

"It is easy to get stiff shoulders when you have large breasts. Were you unaware of that?"

"That's not what I meant by 'why.'"

I wasn't asking why she had stiff shoulders, but why *I* had any obligation to rub them.

"Oh, dear. I can no longer move... I may need to stay here on your bed until I am a mere skeleton. Oh, deary me!" She then began to roll around on my bed.

"Okay already! Stop rubbing your scent all over my bed!" I sat Higashira on her knees, kneeled behind her, and placed my hands on her shoulders.

Higashira looked up at me, her eyes glistening. "Please...be gentle." As soon as I put pressure on her shoulders with my fingers, Higashira jumped and let out a gasp. "Hngh! Y-Yes, please continue... Ahn!"

"Okay, seriously, what are you playing at?"

"I'm reenacting the very popular light novel trope of doing something perfectly innocent while acting as though it is dirty."

"That trope doesn't exist in real life!"

"Ow! Ow, ow, owie! Y-You're gripping me too hard! Ow, ow, ow!" Higashira cried out as I dug my fingers into the fleshy parts of her stiff shoulders.

"Why are you two so close?!" Yume interjected from the other side of the room.

I thought she'd chilled out a little while reading, but from the tone of her voice, it seemed like she'd returned to freak-out mode.

"You two have gotta be pulling a fast one on me! Are you sure you're not actually dating?!" Yume's face was flushed as she shakily pointed her finger at us.

"Whatever do you mean? We've been like this from the beginning, right, Mizuto-kun?"

"Yeah, sounds about right. We're friends, so..."

"Wait, I got it!" Yume exclaimed after looking at us. "I got it! I got it! Since neither of you have ever had friends before, you don't have personal space bubbles! Case closed!"

"How rude. I have at least...one friend..."

"Yeah, exactly. I have a friend...or two..."

Higashira and I both shifted our eyes away from Yume.

"Well..." I started. "Everyone's personal space bubble is different, right?"

“You know what they say,” Higashira agreed, “to each their own, right?”

“Whatever! Get off both the bed and each other before you start making excuses!”

Higashira let out a heavy sigh and leaned her head against my chest. “It must be quite challenging for you to have a brother-loving little stepsister, Mizuto-kun.”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

“I’m neither a brother lover *nor* his *little* stepsister!”

“Please assist me with putting on my socks.” Higashira stuck out her bare leg to me, completely ignoring Yume’s words of protest.

I was used to this by now, so I picked up the socks she’d dropped on the floor and pulled her toes and then her foot through the sock while supporting her heel with my hand.

“I’ve wondered about this for a while, but why don’t you try putting your socks on by yourself?” Yume asked.

“Well, you see, it is very difficult to bend over with my chest being this large.”

“You’re blaming your chest?! Be thankful Minami-san isn’t here!” Yume shook her head.

“Heh heh, well if I’m being honest, I’ve become accustomed to Mizuto-kun tending to me like this.”

“Sometimes I put them on backwards though,” I chimed in.

“Huh? Really?”

“Yep.”

“How disloyal of you!”

“Ow. Don’t kick me!”

I blocked her incoming kicks while finishing putting her socks on. And then Higashira finally got off my bed.

“May I borrow your restroom?”

“I thought you were going home. Are you gonna stay here longer?”

“I’m planning on looking for a few books to borrow before I depart.”

“All right. The bathroom’s down the stairs—first door on the left.”

“Thank you very much.” Higashira swiftly exited the room, leaving Yume and me behind.

For some reason, Yume was firmly glaring at me as if she was holding a grudge, but I couldn’t recall doing anything deserving of her scorn. I decided that it was best to not engage and thus went back to reading, pretending not to notice.

“Hey,” her sharp voice rang out, prompting me to glance at her.

As I did, I saw her taking off her black thigh-high socks. *Huh? What’s she doing?* Her long, bare, porcelain legs were in full view. I

hadn't seen them since the time I had run into her when she was coming out of the bath, but just like then, there wasn't any excess flab on them whatsoever. Between Higashira and her, she seemed to have the more slender legs.

She took her socks, approached me on the bed, and then plopped down right next to me...just like Higashira had done.

"Put them on for me." She thrust her socks at me.

I had no clue what was going on, or what she was trying to do. It was so confusing that I didn't know if I should laugh or what.

"I don't get what you're trying to compete against. Are you really *that* possessive?"

"Shut it. I just thought that using you like a servant would be amusing. Now put them on me."

She really was a difficult person to deal with. If I kept trying to ask questions, that'd give more time for Higashira to come back and see this situation, and in that case, I figured I should just get it over with. I took the black thigh-highs from her and gently supported her heel with my left hand, just as I had done with Higashira.

A pale blue vein had surfaced on the back of her foot. Her toenails were meticulously and evenly cut, unlike Higashira's, since she had the tendency to let them grow out. I took the sock and pulled her toes through the opening as if I was trying to conceal them. When her toes reached the end of the sock, I began pulling up the rest of it past her ankle.

I continued pulling the sock over her smooth, gorgeous shin and lean calf. As soon as I realized that I'd already pulled the sock up to her kneecap, I had a self-revelation. Higashira only wore socks that went up to her calves, but the socks that Yume was wearing went up past the knee, meaning that my hands would inevitably go much higher than they'd ever gone with Higashira.

I glanced at Yume's face and saw that her face was flushed red, making me quickly look back at my hands. *Oh, now you realize?! What she'd asked me to do was a bigger invasion of personal space than anything she'd ever asked before. If she'd asked me to stop, I would have done so immediately. With that said, I stopped my hands for a few seconds.*

However, she showed no sign of halting me. She stayed completely silent. So, I followed suit and kept my mouth shut, pretending not to notice anything, and continued moving the sock up her leg until her knee was wrapped in the black cloth.

Next, I slowly and carefully pushed the sock up with my hand. From the corner of my eye, I could see that Yume was tightly gripping the sheets with her hands. I began to focus on my fingers with the intensity of a heart surgeon as I moved them, desperately avoiding

touching her hands. Before long, the sock was fully on without any wrinkles. The black cloth now perfectly embraced her leg from her toes to her thigh.

I exhaled and let go. As I did, my fingers slightly dug into her inner thigh, prompting her to tremble and let out a strange squeal. My head snapped up, and I saw that her face was flushed. She quickly covered her mouth with her hand to hide her embarrassment.

“I-It’s nothing...”

Of course. It’d be bad if it were actually “something.” I returned my gaze to my hand which held the remaining sock. It was obvious, but socks came in pairs, meaning that there was still one sock left.

“So...what about this one?” I asked hesitantly in a low voice.

Then, in a voice even lower than mine, she made a sound before extending her other bare leg in my direction.

Of course that was her response! Because this is “nothing”! I cleared my mind to be serene and tranquil as I readied myself to put the remaining sock on for Yume, but before I could, my phone began vibrating, making both of us jump. *Someone’s texting me?*

“Mind if I look?” I asked, glancing at Yume.

“G-Go ahead,” Yume said, looking away from me.

I internally let out a sigh of relief. *Why do I have to feel like this around someone like her?* I got off the bed and walked to my desk where I saw that I’d received a LINE message from Higashira.

Izanami: need aid

“I greatly appreciate your assistance. I haven’t the faintest idea how to converse with adults that I’m unacquainted with.”

“Yeah, because you’ve never had a conversation that extends outside of light novels and your boobs.”

“Oh, certainly!”

It seemed that on the way to the bathroom, she had the bad luck of being spotted by dad and Yuni-san. Given that both of them were extremely interested in their son’s love life, she’d been subjected to their questioning.

Luckily, she’d been able to send us an SOS, and we made it in time to rescue her. When we did, both Yume and I decided that it’d be best for her to go home at that point; every second she spent at our house had the potential to make things worse.

I decided that it’d be better if I walked her home just in case, even though the sun was still out.

“Your parents seem to be under the impression that I am your former partner. I wonder what brought them to that conclusion.”

“Really. You have *no* idea? That’s rich.”

“But I must say, it is a nice feeling—the feeling of being seen as someone’s girlfriend. I was so inundated with the pleasure of it that I couldn’t help but act as such.”

“You just made things worse!”

Do any of the girls I know have good characters?!

“But, hm, how do I put this?” Higashira said as she stepped on the shadows cast in front of her one by one. “Even for me, it was difficult to plainly say that I confessed to you, got rejected, and have never once been your girlfriend.”

“...”

“So, it’s fine to leave things as they are, wouldn’t you say? At the very least, it will allow me to have been your girlfriend within the realm of their misunderstandings, albeit your *former* one.” Higashira skipped over the shadow cast by a telephone pole ahead of us while half whispering the last part. “To be honest, I am still a little hurt, Mizuto-kun,” she said, looking at me with her usual emotionless face.

“I see...”

“So please, properly comfort me as a friend.”

“Sure thing.”

We were walking side by side, but we weren’t holding hands. We were just walking shoulder to shoulder, which was exactly what she wanted right now.

“I am truly glad to have met you, Mizuto-kun.”

“Yeah, same.”

“Heh heh, it would seem that we have mutual feelings for each other.”

“Yeah.”

“Since we have mutual feelings, how about we begin dating as well?”

“Yeah, I don’t think so.”

“Oh dear, it seems I’ve been rejected once again.” Higashira began snickering uncontrollably.

For whatever reason, it seemed as if the shadows being cast were avoiding her. We were walking side by side, but we weren’t holding hands. Maybe that was the biggest difference. *What if we hadn’t dated?* This was nothing but a pointless hypothetical, especially now that all was said and done. There was no way either of us could be like Isana Higashira.

“Is something the matter, Mizuto-kun?” Higashira said, looking right into my eyes.

She looked right at me without blushing, without shifting her eyes, without trying to play it off—she looked right at me. I felt dizzy, but that had to have been because of the sunset.

“Sorry.”

“Hm? Where did that come from? How about you buy me a book for the time being as an apology for whatever you’re apologizing for?”

“Don’t ask for compensation without even knowing what’s going on.”

I’m sorry, Higashira. I’m seriously sorry that the two of us aren’t like you. We continued walking next to each other as night continued to fall, our shadows growing longer and longer.

Isana Higashira Dresses Up

“Please don’t make it sound like I’m indecent!”

In what could only be described as a folly of youth, I had a so-called boyfriend during eighth and ninth grade.

A wise person can probably already guess what I was like back in those days from the way I talk about that time. For someone like me who lacked any refinement, it was clear as day that I had a problem that needed to be dealt with as soon as possible—I needed to learn how to dress.

Before we dated, we’d spent day after day rendezvousing at school during summer break, meaning that we’d always been in our school uniforms. And then, our first date had been at the summer festival, so I’d worn a yukata. I made tactical decisions in order to stay one step ahead of my problem wardrobe, and it worked up until we officially started dating.

Since we were indoorsy types, our date ideas consisted of visiting bookstores and libraries, which was fine, but we had to meet up first before heading to our destination. Plus, these dates were not during school days, but on our days off, meaning it would’ve been weird for me to wear my uniform.

I had to dress in my own clothes, which would put my lack of fashion sense on display. Since I didn’t have any friends, the only resources I could rely on were the internet and magazines.

After learning the dos and don’ts of fashion, I innocently asked my mom for funds and mustered up the courage to enter an apparel shop—a battlefield I’d never thought I would enter. After successfully infiltrating, I could only tremble in fear as I was immediately accosted by an energetic saleswoman.

After this and that, I finally obtained a date outfit. When I looked at myself in the mirror, I could hardly believe it was really me. If anything, looking at my reflection just made me think I was playing dress-up. Maybe that’s why, despite usually having no confidence in my appearance, I felt proud and thought that I looked pretty cute.

It was the first time I’d ever thought that after looking in the mirror. After all, the only people who looked in the mirror and thought they looked good were narcissists. I wasn’t cringe enough to call myself cute all the time. There was little to no chance that I’d ever grow to genuinely think I was cute...or at least that’s what I thought

back then.

Here's a message to all the guys out there: girls are not necessarily narcissists. There's a difference between thinking that clothes are cute and thinking that we ourselves are cute.

In all likelihood, the moment I thought I was cute after dressing up was precisely the moment that I awoke to being a girl. Putting aside my self-appraisal, I definitely began to understand the benefits of fashion. Thanks to dating *that guy*, I learned about its importance for the first time in my life.

It took me until I entered high school to realize this, but my fashion sense had warped from "what guys like" to "what *that guy* likes."

On the day of our date, I'd arrived wearing not the usual knee-length school skirt, but a miniskirt. Who would've expected that someone so out of tune with fashion like me would wear something that exposed her thighs? So, how do you think Mizuto Irido reacted when he saw me dressed like that?

"Morning. Let's get going," he said, motioning for me to follow him.

Uh, hello? No reaction? This is the first time you're seeing your girlfriend in her street clothes. Do you know how hard I worked to learn how to dress up? Uh...I am your girlfriend, right?!

On the surface, I was calm, but I continued to flash nervous glances at him. No matter how much I waited, though, he gave no indication that he was ever going to say a single thing about my outfit, which worried me.

Oh no, is my outfit totally lame? Personally, I thought I looked pretty cute, but maybe that was just me. Irido-kun's kind, so maybe he decided to be considerate and not comment at all.

The more I thought about it, the more that seemed to be the case. How else could I have explained his lack of compliments when he was such a kind and considerate person? I know better now, but back then, I hadn't thought there was any way he'd do something as stereotypical as just *forget* to compliment me on my outfit.

Then, all I could think about were all the things that I'd messed up in the past, and suddenly my head was a storm of negativity. This only served to hammer home the fact that my outfit was not as cute as I'd thought it was, making me even more depressed.

Despite that, I still pulled off the perfect date consisting of visiting different bookstores and chatting at a café.

At the end of it all, when it seemed like we were about to say goodbye for the day, he said something completely out of the blue. "Your clothes today... I think they're cute."

"Huh?" My mind was so full of all my past mistakes that this

caught me completely by surprise. *Why now? Why when we're going home?!*

I had a lot of questions, but the way he averted his eyes and covered his mouth with his hand was enough of an answer. He'd wanted to compliment me earlier, but he was too embarrassed. By the time he'd worked up the courage to do so, our date had ended.

I absolutely freaked out on the inside. *I'm getting chills! Who is this embarrassed boy in front of me?!* My poor past self had no idea how much of a painful memory this'd be in the future. But I couldn't help it. I was trembling with happiness, knowing what had gone through his head.

"But, um, I'd be grateful if...you didn't wear a miniskirt again." He followed up with an unexpected comment.

"Huh? D-Do you not like miniskirts?"

"No, that's not it. I just..." Then, he made a face as if to say that it wasn't a big deal. "You can wear them, just not in public."

"Huh?" I tilted my head in confusion.

I had no clue what he was thinking, so I just kinda agreed. Then, we waved goodbye and went home for the day. It wasn't until I was almost home that the gears in my head started to turn. *What did he mean by "just not in public"? So it's okay for me to wear it at home? Why can't I wear it outside? Because there are other people around?*

That's when it hit me. He didn't want *other* people to see my bare legs. As soon as I realized that, my cheeks turned hot, and I tugged on the hem of my skirt. "*Gross. Possessive, much?*" is what I think now, but back then, it was the opposite. The fact that someone wanted me all to themselves was like a dream come true. Better yet, *he* wanted me.

It was surprising that someone as calm as he could be so transparently possessive. After realizing that, my face was nothing but smiles the entire way home, and I never wore a miniskirt again.



Akatsuki-san and I sat down on the stone edge of a flower bed at the corner of an intersection and idly watched people pass us by. Since this was the weekend, the ratio of plainclothes to suits was much higher than usual. I was kind of impressed by how most of the people in the world knew what kind of clothes they could wear without other people giving them weird looks.

"What kinda clothes do you think she'll be wearing?" Akatsuki-san asked me suddenly.

"Isn't it obvious?" I replied.

"Okay, then what?"

"Hm... A goth look or something?"

“No way can she afford those kinds of clothes!”

“All right, then what do you think, Akatsuki-san?”

“I bet she’ll come in her school uniform.”

“Oh, makes sense. Uniforms are convenient.”

“They are! When I don’t have to put on a uniform, I find myself thinking about how annoying it is to pick out an outfit.”

“When we go to college, we’re gonna have to pick an outfit every day.”

“Ugh, what a pain.” Akatsuki-san burst out laughing. “But anyway, we should start mentally preparing ourselves for whatever she’s got on.”

“True. I need to prepare for goth clothes.”

“I’ve got no clue how exactly to prepare ourselves though.”

“True...”

While we continued our random conversation, the person we were waiting for finally showed up. She started jogging towards us as we stood up.

“M-My apologies! A-Am I tardy?”

The entire time she drew closer to us, both Akatsuki-san and I stared at Isana Higashira in silence.

She was wearing a shirt with some random words on it that were so stretched out by the robustness of her chest they looked more like some kind of code. Plus, she had a shabby hooded jacket and denim jeans...which had probably been blue at some point, but were now faded, most likely due to repeated washing over the years.

Looking at her, both Akatsuki-san and I had the following reaction: a sigh of relief.

“W-Wait, what? Why do the two of you seem so relieved?”

“Phew, you came in normal, lame-lookin’ clothes.”

“I had no clue how I was gonna react if you came in a full-blown goth outfit. Lame clothes, I can deal with.”

“U-Um am I possibly being bullied? I am, aren’t I?!” she said tearfully in her (lame) outfit.

The clothes she had on were okay if she was just going to a convenience store or something, but definitely not out with friends like this. If she were hanging out with anyone but us, they’d definitely laugh at her for real without a shred of sympathy.

“Higashira-san, it’s time to announce what we’re doing today!” Akatsuki-san said, pointing at her. “I call today’s objective: ‘Isana Higashira’s Glow-Up.’”

“P-Pardon?!” Higashira-san looked visibly confused, most likely since she didn’t have much experience going out with friends like this.

“Well, listen—we never really got to check out your wardrobe during the entire confession strategizing, and if you think about it,

finals are just around the corner with summer vacation hot on their heels. You know what that means, don'tcha? You'll be hanging out with Irido-kun in an outfit other than your school uniform. You don't want to wear anything embarrassing, do you?"

"U-Um, please explain why you assume my attire would be embarrassing? You've never laid eyes on my clothes."

"I bet you don't have much money on you, so we'll foot the bill."

"Yes, we'll help split the costs of the clothes you buy," I chimed in, also choosing to ignore Higashira-san's question.

"P-Please wait! I-I could not possibly ask for you two to pay in my stead!"

"Chill, it's all good! Just think about it as a gift."

"Exactly! And in return, we just ask for one small thing."

"Wh-What would that be?"

"No complaining. Wear whatever we tell you to," Akatsuki-san and I said in unison while smiling.

Higashira-san let out a silent scream in response to the true objective of "Isana Higashira's Glow-Up"—or rather, "My Dress-Up Isana Higashira."

"Aw, don't worry, we won't make you wear anything *too* bad, right, Yume-chan?"

"Yes, of course. We'll make sure everything conforms to public decency laws."

The two of us repeatedly tried to reassure Higashira-san that she'd be okay as we walked around the mall, but she wasn't having it.

"A-Are you positive? You're not going to make me wear a garment that exposes my belly button are you?" she asked, trembling like a squirrel that'd fallen into a lion's den.

"Of course not! It might be summer, but that's slut territory," Akatsuki-san said with a bright smile as she brought us into a clothing store.

Upon entry, it was obvious that the majority of the clothes were summer-wear, which made sense since it was June and the temperature was beginning to get warmer.

Akatsuki-san squealed and instantly grabbed a top from the sea of revealing clothes. "I found a camisole!"

"N-No, thank you! That is the one thing that I absolutely must not wear! My cleavage will be completely exposed!"

"Shut yer trap and put it on!" Akatsuki-san grabbed some nearby short shorts and shoved them into Higashira-san's arms with the camisole.

I was frightened by how quickly Akatsuki-san switched into an abusive father.

“I-I must wear these? These are the kinds of garments straight from ‘sexy time’ in a horror movie! Are you serious? Are you in your right mind?!”

“Wear whatever we tell you to.”

“No complaining,” I insisted.

Higashira-san yelped as we pushed her into the fitting room. After realizing that she wasn’t getting past the two of us, she gave up and began changing.

“Hm? W-Wait, I-I think this is too small!”

“Want some heelp?” Akatsuki-san said in a sickeningly sweet voice.

“N-No, I-I will manage by myself. Something about the tone of your voice frightens me.”

“I wanted to see those huge milkers in the flesh.” Akatsuki-san clicked her tongue in disappointment.

“You’re way too true to your desires.” I kinda wanted to see them too, though.

After a minute or so passed, we heard a timid voice from the other side of the curtain. “U-Um, I have finished dressing myself. A-Are there any other people present?”

“Nope, just us.”

“Y-You’re not lying, are you? I’m going to trust you. I’m putting my trust in you, okay?”

Then, after about a ten-second pause, the curtains opened, and both Akatsuki-san and I gulped after seeing Higashira-san. The camisole was stretched to its limits thanks to her bountiful chest, and as a result, it was pulled up far enough that her bellybutton was on full display. Her short shorts were digging into her thighs as well—they were probably a size too small.

If we had to describe her appearance into one word, it’d be...

“Sexy!!!”

“I told you!” Higashira-san practically screamed before shutting the curtain.

The level of sexiness was enough to leave anyone speechless. If she walked outside like this, she’d be detained for indecent and obscene exposure.

“My mother always tells me not to wear clothes that are too revealing because my body exceeds all conventions of sexy and jumps into vulgar territory.”

“Your mom is a wise woman.” I nodded in understanding.

“I like that outfit on you, but I can’t letcha get arrested for indecent exposure.”

With that, it was my turn since I was the one who specialized in more reserved clothing. After all, I was known (among my friends) as

the girl who made it a point to not expose my bare legs to anyone. I walked around the store and picked out a few items that looked good before returning to the fitting room.

“How about this? It has a neckline, so the exposure should be minimal.”

“I feel like it’s a little flirty, but that should work. It’s got a pure feel to it too.”

“My fashion sense is flirty?”

“And it totally works for you, Yume-chan! It’s cute!”

“*Flirty?*” I was a little hung up on that, but I’d gotten the green light from Akatsuki-san, so I passed the clothes to Higashira-san.

“I suppose these clothes are fine...” She accepted my choices, shut the curtain, and then there was the sound of clothes rustling before the curtain opened again. “How is this...?”

The outfit I had chosen for her focused on simplicity: a shirt and a high-waist skirt to match. Akatsuki-san may have called this “pure,” but that’s because I’d chosen plain colors—a white shirt and navy blue skirt—to go well with Higashira-san’s personality. Most likely, similar to *him*, she wasn’t a big fan of flashy colors.

I’d also heard before that people with big breasts worry that people will think that they’re chubby, so I decided to give her a high skirt that would make her waistline clear. However, her beautiful chest was made more prominent thanks to her shirt being tucked in.

“Sexy!!!” Akatsuki-san and I exclaimed again.

“What am I supposed to do?!” Higashira-san asked while crouching, her face flushed.

Her embarrassed expression made her seem even sexier. Akatsuki-san and I both folded our arms.

“This might be a little harder than we thought, Yume-chan.”

“Yes, no matter what she wears, she makes it erotic.”

“P-Please stop! Please don’t make it sound like I’m indecent! I’m already self-conscious in that regard!” Higashira-san pulled the curtain back closed to hide herself.



From behind the curtains, I could hear the sound of clothes being desperately taken off. She was taking off those pure, but dirty, clothes... *Sexy*.

"In the first place, we should be focusing on a way to deal with those G-cup breasts of hers. The only options we have are to let her look either 'thicc' or like a video game character," I suggested.

"Girls with big tits have it rough, huh? I think this is the first time I've felt anything but hatred for them."

"You have that much hatred for them?!"

"How about we make her a titty bag! Let's lean into the 2D world!"

"Sorry, a what?"

"Like this!" Akatsuki-san pulled out her phone and showed me something that looked like a screenshot from some anime where the bust of a beautiful girl could be clearly seen even through her clothes.

"Um, that looks like it's defying the laws of gravity."

"I'm sure it's possible in real life. I bet Higashira-san would really enjoy having something like this too!"

"Please do not combine fiction and reality!" Higashira-san cried passionately as she exited the fitting room, back in her old clothes. "For your reference, anyone who walks around with a 'titty bag' in broad daylight is either not right in the head or has no shred of shame! They are akin to Adam and Eve before they bit the apple!"

"Doesn't that kinda put them in a better light?"

"Damn, I wanted to make Higashira-san cosplay."

"Cosplay? Oh, if it's something like a maid outfit, I am perfectly okay with that."

"You are?!" Akatsuki-san said excitedly.

"Of course you have an interest in cosplay..."

"M-Me? N-No! Not in the slightest!" But as hard as Higashira-san tried to deny it, it was all too obvious that she did.

We continued looking around the store, and I started trying to think of what kind of clothes would best hide her bust lines. Something loose would be best, I figured, but if we weren't careful, we'd end up making it look like she was heavier than she was. And if we tried to tie the shirt against her waist, it would just emphasize her breasts. *Mm... This is hard.*

"I'm thinkin' something loose and flowy would be good," Akatsuki-san suggested.

"Loose and..." I started.

"Flowy?" Higashira-san blinked.

"Something close to your style of clothes, Yume-chan."

I looked down at my own outfit—a white blouse with a beige

flared skirt. The reason I had a penchant for choosing brighter colors was that my black hair would overlap with the darker clothes that *he'd* wear back when we were dating. I absolutely did not want to be the kind of couple who wore matching colors.

"With the clothes you wear, your figure isn't clearly defined," Akatsuki-san explained. "You're the kinda girl who doesn't like people looking at you, right? So that's why you buy tops that are bigger than your actual size and wear skirts that are loose and flowy. I bet you also wear gauchos, right? I think that kinda look would work with Higashira-san. She kinda has that flowy vibe to begin with."

"Hm... That's true."

"I'm...flowy?" Higashira-san tilted her head in confusion.

Yes. *Yes you are.*

"But the only thing is that your styles would overlap," Akatsuki-san said with a grimace.

"Is it a problem if we do?" Higashira-san tilted her head again.

"Of course! Isn't it kinda sad if you see two loose and flowy girls walking next to each other?"

"So you're saying that it is insufficient to simply wear clothes that suit you. It's vital to also match the people around you as well? That's..."

"'Annoying'? It's written all over your face, Higashira-san." Akatsuki-san said, finishing Higashira-san's sentence. "But you're right. *It is* annoying. Welcome to the world of girls!"

"I think I'm presently even more inclined to never involve myself in that world."

"Well, we're not so mean as to make you conform to all the rules right off the bat, right, Yume-chan?"

"Huh?"

I had no clue why she was asking me this question.

"If your two styles overlap, then we just have to change *your* style, Yume-chan!"

"Huh? M-Mine?"

"Yeah! Let's take this chance to revolutionize your wardrobe!"

Oh my god. This was her plan all along! She'd constantly been talking about how she wanted me to try wearing "cooler" clothes. *I keep telling her that those kinds of clothes aren't my thing!*

"Hm, what should I choose...? Oh, maybe this?"

Before I could stop her, Akatsuki-san had already begun browsing the different pants. *What's going on?! Th-This is supposed to be Higashira-san's dress-up day, not mine!* In the blink of an eye, Akatsuki-san had already finished gathering the clothes she wanted me to put on. *This had to have been premeditated.*

"All righty, try these on!"

“I-I think I’ll pa—”

“Try. These. On.” The smile on her face made it clear that I didn’t have the luxury of saying “no” here.

I tried looking to Higashira-san for help, but she immediately looked away. *Have you no heart?! Sure, misery loves company, but that doesn’t mean—*

“C’mon, go on in! Oh, and tie your hair up. It’ll definitely look better that way. Here’s a hair tie!” Akatsuki-san rushed me into the fitting room.

When I was in there, I saw myself in the mirror with the clothes that she’d given me, the lines of my body distinctly visible. The kinds of clothes I usually avoided. I internally moaned at my current situation. *How could a girl who only recently got used to her school uniform wear something like this?!*

But all I had to do was wear this once, and then that should satiate Akatsuki-san. That was my only way out of this. I quickly changed out of my clothes and into the ones that she’d chosen for me—a sleeveless blue top and white skinny jeans. The outfit may not have been very exposing, but it did perfectly outline my legs.

As for the finishing touches, I tied my hair up, but since a ponytail would be too close to Akatsuki-san’s style, I decided to lay it over my shoulder instead. Even as I gazed upon the finished product, I had no idea whether I looked good or not. I had nothing to compare it to, or more accurately...I had nobody I wanted to show this to.

In the past, when I would get dressed up, it was because there was someone I wanted to show off to. I’d imagine their reaction and choose whatever I thought would make them the happiest. This helped make up for my lack of a fashion sense, but now that I no longer had someone like that, I was pretty much the same as Higashira-san—a fashion newbie. I had no idea what to do to really “complete” my look. But at this point, I decided that I’d just get it over with because agonizing was too annoying. With that in mind, I pulled back the curtain.

“What...do you think?”

Akatsuki-san and Higashira-san looked me up and down and then...

“Whoa!!!”

“S-So cool...!”

They loved it. Akatsuki-san’s face grew red from excitement while Higashira-san’s eyes glittered with admiration. *Huh? Really? I look good in this?*

“I *knew* you’d look good in this since you’re so slender! There aren’t many girls who can pull off skinny jeans, but you seriously do!”

Judging by how quickly Akatsuki-san was speaking, it was

probably safe to take her word for it. Suddenly, I felt kinda embarrassed. Up until now, my fashion sense had been focused on pleasing someone of the opposite sex—more specifically, just not wearing anything that would embarrass *him*. But trying on clothes like this with my friends was...not bad at all.

I looked at myself again. It was like I'd grown three years older. The outfit made me feel as if all my outfits until now were just childish, overly girly, or too pandering to guys. This wasn't too bad at all...maybe?

I looked at the price tags and was surprised by how affordable they were. Recently, I'd been borrowing books from *him*, so I had a little more money from my book budget. Plus, I already typically bought books that were on the cheaper side. Thanks to that, I had a good amount of money. *I guess... Might as well.*

"I'm going to get someone to cut off the tags."

"Finally! My hopes, my dreams...! Thank you, God!!!"

This was a good chance to change things up. I couldn't keep wearing the same kinds of clothes that I'd been wearing since middle school. I had no reason to match my clothes to *his* preferences.

"All right then, it's time for the main event. It's your turn, Higashira-san! Here ya go!"

While I paid, Akatsuki-san was already picking an outfit for Higashira-san. The clothes she'd decided on were all on the darker side and avoided making her look heavysset.

"U-Um, I'm unsure about these clothes. Wouldn't you agree that they're a little *too* cute?"

"They're to make *you* cuter, so of course they are! Now, go on. Try 'em!" She pushed Higashira-san into the fitting room and shut the curtain behind her.

I honestly wished that Higashira-san could find dressing up fun without having it be tied to romance. If she could, I was sure that her lack of confidence could be at least slightly improved. Right now, she might have been relying on *him* a little too much, but I couldn't really say too much if they were both okay with it.

As I thought that, I waited with Akatsuki-san outside of the fitting room, and that's when an unexpected situation occurred.

"Huh? What are you guys doing here?" a familiar voice called out to us.

We turned around and froze. There were two guys looking at us from the entrance of the store. One of them had messily styled hair, was wearing capris, and had a very frivolous air to him. He was my classmate and Akatsuki-san's childhood friend, Kogure Kawanami.

In contrast, the other one was wearing a worn-out vest and shirt, wrinkled chino pants, and had an extremely bored look in his eyes. It

was my ex and little stepbrother, Mizuto Irido.

For some reason the two people with the deepest connections to us were here.

“K-Kawanami?” Akatsuki-san’s face slightly stiffened for some reason. “What’re you two doing here?”

“Whaddya mean? We’re here to buy clothes. It’s summer, so I wanted to get ‘Mizuto-kun’ here some summer clothes before we enter the hell of final exams.”

“Didn’t ask you to...” Mizuto said with great annoyance.

“Aw, don’t say that! I’m gonna make you into the hottest guy the summer’s ever seen!” Kawanami-san said with a bright smile, putting his hand on Mizuto’s shoulder.

“I don’t need to be. Dammit, why’d I go over to your place at all? I messed up.”

“Nah, you didn’t! Not only did you give your parents some alone time, but now you’re getting treated to some fresh threads!”

Oh, I see. No wonder he’s with Kawanami-kun. This must have been part of the trade of letting him stay over that one time. But more importantly...was there a summer version of the hottie from our aquarium date? I kinda wanted to ask for a little more information, but before I could, Kawanami-kun looked at me and gasped.

“Irido-san, you’re rockin’ a different vibe today. Lookin’ cool!”

“Right?! I guess even *you* can see how great she looks!” Akatsuki-san said proudly.

“What do you mean ‘even me’? Also, what are you acting so proud for?”

Now that Kawanami-kun mentioned it, though, I was reminded that I was in a completely different outfit than I’d worn in middle school. Mizuto’s eyes kept flitting towards me, and my body just stiffened even more. All the clothes I normally wore were just an extension of the clothes I’d worn when we dated, but not now.

Akatsuki-san and Higashira-san may have really liked it, but he—No, I needed to stop myself from thinking about what *he* thought. What did it matter if he didn’t like what I was wearing? His opinion had absolutely no effect on me. All I had to do was wear clothes that *I* wanted to wear.

All right, go on. Tell me what you think. But no matter what you say, it won’t bother me one bit. I began taking a defensive stance, ready to take him on, but just as I looked into his eyes, he turned away. *So these really aren’t the kinds of clothes he likes. Whatever. That’s fine. I don’t care at all.*

“Hm?” Kawanami-kun was directing his gaze behind us to where Higashira-san was currently changing.

“Your friend back there?”

“Nope! Nuh-uh. Complete stranger! I’m on a date with *just* Yume-chan!”

Huh? Just as I was wondering why Akatsuki-san was lying, she grabbed my arm and simultaneously whispered into my ear. “We absolutely *cannot* let him meet Higashira-san, Yume-chan!”

I had no clue what would be so bad about the two of them meeting, but I decided to keep my mouth shut.

“I see.” Kawanami-kun looked away from the fitting room as if he was convinced.

Just as Akatsuki-san let out a breath of relief, we heard the shutter of a phone’s camera from behind us.

“Huh?”

After a brief pause, Mizuto’s phone vibrated. He took it out of his pocket and looked at the screen tiredly before completely freezing. He looked from his phone to the fitting room that Higashira-san was in and stared at it.

Oh, no... I didn’t want to even imagine what’d just happened, but it seemed that both Akatsuki-san and I had the same thought. There was no way Higashira-san just...

“You get a LINE message? From who?”

“My dad,” Mizuto said, casually distancing himself from Kawanami-kun while hiding the screen from him.

He moved his slender fingers across the screen to reply.

“Let’s get this over with, Kawanami. I wanna go home and read.” Mizuto quickly walked out of the store.

“Okay, okay. I guess you *are* here for my enjoyment. Later!” Kawanami-kun followed right behind him, waving bye to us before they both disappeared into the crowd.

After we were sure they were gone, Akatsuki-san and I slowly turned to the fitting room...and flung the curtains open.

“Ah! Wh-What are you doing?!” Higashira-san jumped in surprise...fully clothed.

She had on a loose green V-neck tucked into a beige flared skirt. Like this, her chest didn’t really stand out, and her waist was clearly defined, just like Akatsuki-san had intended. It may have looked kinda plain, but plain worked well for Higashira-san. My first impression was that she was similar to the village girls that appeared in video games, but it really suited her.

However, her outfit was not the thing we were most interested in right now; it was the phone she was clutching tightly to her chest.

“I don’t think this will violate public decency laws,” I noted.

“Yeah, this isn’t completely dirty or anything.”

“H-Huh?” Higashira-san looked at both of us with confusion.

The worst possible scenario would have been if she had been

using her phone while half-naked, but that thought apparently hadn't crossed her mind.

"I'll let you off the hook this time, since it looks like we jumped to conclusions."

"Yeah, you may have taken action before conferring with us, but I totally get you wanting to show him your outfit first."

"Huh? How... How did you know?"

Don't make us spell it out for you!

"So how'd it go? What'd he think?" Akatsuki-san said, changing the subject.

"Um, well..." Higashira lifted her phone to hide her mouth behind it, but we could easily tell she was smiling.

From that, it was pretty easy to tell what the answer was.

"Can I...buy these clothes?" she asked, looking up at us with puppy dog eyes.

"Very well," Akatsuki-san said kind of pompously.

I agreed too. Higashira-san looked back at her phone and beamed again.

Well, in the end, I figured it didn't matter how she got her start. It's totally okay if she bought clothes that fit the tastes of the person she liked. She could change that as she went along.

"Heh heh heh..."

Looking at Higashira-san, who was happily glancing between her reflection and her phone, I couldn't help but think that she really was following in my footsteps.

After that fiasco, the three of us had resumed wandering around the mall. I'd been holding onto a question I wanted to ask Higashira-san, so when we sat on a bench while Akatsuki-san made a trip to the bathroom, I pounced on the opportunity.

"Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Hm?" Higashira-san happily licked the cream from her crepe and looked over at me.

"Do you... Do you still have feelings for him?"

"Are you referring to Mizuto-kun?"

I nodded. She'd *just* confessed and gotten rejected earlier this month, yet she seemed perfectly fine despite all of that. And that being said, there were scenarios like earlier when she'd tried to catch his eye when he wasn't looking, which made it seem as if she was still interested in him.

This begged the question: was she still into him or not?

"Indeed. My feelings towards him are unchanged," she replied, taking a bite of her crepe. "The reason I developed my attraction was not because I had the intention of becoming his partner, so I am

doubtful that my feelings both as a romantic interest and a friend shall ever wane."

"Isn't that..." I hesitated before continuing. "Isn't that hard on you?"

"Hm, of that I'm unsure. At the very least, I'm positive that I'm enjoying myself around him more than I did previously. Perhaps that has to do with the fact that I've no reason to hide my feelings any longer."

"But what if..." Suddenly, I remembered myself from just a little before. "What if he got a girlfriend?"

"Hm... I'm certain I'd be vexed. As laughable as it may sound, I'd feel as if I'd lost. However, I don't believe that Mizuto-kun would ever distance himself from me, and I think that's fine in its own right. Then again, I cannot truly predict my feelings until it actually happens. If anything, I think I'd be more jealous if Mizuto-kun made another friend."

"Huh?"

"The person Mizuto-kun has the most fun around must be me! If he were to enjoy himself with some unknown person... Ugh, just the thought of it irritates me so." She then proceeded to gobble up the rest of her crepe.

Hold the phone. What? Oh, wait. Higashira-san wasn't in the same class as Kawanami-kun, so she didn't know about him. Finally, it all made sense why Akatsuki-san didn't want the two of them to meet.

"So you'll get jealous of his friends, but not his girlfriend?"

"Yes. Simply imagining that scenario tears me up inside. Is this what being a cuckold feels like? You know what I mean, don't you, Yume-san? Hypothetically, if one day, his long-lost little sister were to show up, how would you feel?"

"Well..."

A lot of mixed feelings began swirling inside of me. The thought was definitely unpleasant, but it was a different feeling than when I thought that Higashira-san might become his girlfriend. It wasn't resentment, frustration, or irritation, it was...

"Fear, right?" Higashira-san said, looking at the empty paper that had once held her crepe. "I only have Mizuto-kun. If he began making more friends and didn't need me anymore... That thought scares me a great deal. I'd be very lonely."

I really, really, understand where you're coming from. Like if you were forced out of your home into the cold, harsh world, all by yourself. Now I understood that she wasn't trying to keep Mizuto for herself, but desperately trying to keep her place beside him. *But...is that really okay with you?* Was she really okay relying on him, clinging onto him, and fawning over him like this forever?

“Higashira-san.”

“Yes?”

“You have some cream on your face.”

“Ah!”

As I wiped Higashira-san’s mouth, I thought about how, despite her reliance on Mizuto’s friendship, she was right here with us—no Mizuto in sight. Akatsuki-san and I were the ones who had helped her pick an outfit today, not him.

“Higashira-san, we’re friends, aren’t we?” I asked.

“Huh? U-Uh...” She started to fidget and turned away, her face flushing red before cautiously looking at me. “I-Is that okay?” It was almost as if she was asking for permission, but there was absolutely no need for that.

“Of course! I’ve thought we were friends for a while now.”

“U-Um, b-but—” She had seemed all fired up in one moment, clenching her fist, but then deflated in the next. “You aren’t a replacement for Mizuto-kun,” she said in a very low voice.

It must’ve been very important for her to make that declaration, but it didn’t bother me at all.

“Yes, I know.” *That goes double—maybe even more—for you.*



After the three of us said goodbye for the day, I returned home and saw that the aforementioned little stepbrother had already come back. He was sitting on the living room couch.

“So, what’d you think?” I asked, jumping right into the topic at hand.

“About?”

“Higashira-san.”

“Not bad, I guess,” he said, glancing over his shoulder at me.

“Just say she was cute. So, what was her response?”

Mizuto gave me an annoyed look before grabbing his phone, unlocking it, and shoving it in my face, his chat log with Higashira-san over LINE on full display. In response to his sorry excuse for a compliment, Higashira-san had replied with the following: *Act now to receive one more picture for a mere thousand yen.*

This girl... Why couldn’t she have shown Mizuto the same reaction that she’d shown us? It was seriously so unfortunate that she couldn’t be more honest about her feelings. *You have my sympathy.*

“Why’s she hiding her eyes with her phone?”

“Ask *her* about that.”

“I doubt I’ll get a straight answer.”

It was as if she was taking dirty pictures to post on her socials...which was probably the exact vibe she was going for. I made

a mental note to give her a stern talking-to later.

Suddenly, I felt his gaze on me, and as I looked to confirm, he turned his head away. *Why's he looking at me?* I was still wearing the outfit that Akatsuki-san had picked out for me—the very same outfit he'd completely ignored when he'd seen it earlier. I was sure that he didn't like it at all, but maybe...

"Hmm?" I playfully smirked as I slunk around to the front of the couch.

In response, he looked straight down, doing his best to avoid catching so much as a glimpse of me. I had absolutely no reason to wear clothes to match his preferences. I had no reason to use his preferences as the basis for my outfits. That being said... I took out my phone, turned it sideways, and tried taking a picture just like Higashira-san had, hiding my eyes with my phone.

"H-Hey..." Mizuto's voice shook a little, his mouth slightly twitching. "What are you doing?"

"What? I'm just holding my phone up high to look at it."

"If you've got somethin' you wanna say, just come out and say it."

"Me? I don't have anything like that. Maybe *you're* the one who has something he'd like to say?"

Mizuto frowned and turned away once more. Then, in a very stiff voice, he said, "Your outfit... It's not bad, I guess." He grimaced.

I giggled triumphantly, savoring my victory. I had no reason to avoid miniskirts. He had no right to stop me no matter how much of my legs I wanted to show. But more than that, it was extremely enjoyable to break through that stiff face of his, and I wasn't ready to relinquish this to anyone else.

Kogure Kawanami Won't Accept This

“What the hell, Irido?!”

In what could only be described as a folly of youth, I had a so-called girlfriend during eighth and ninth grade. Thanks to that, I was painfully aware of a certain special yearly event that school couples would inevitably encounter. No, I wasn't thinking about Christmas, Valentine's, New Year's, birthdays, or anniversaries. The event I was thinking of occurred every few months, for a total of four to five times a year—studying for tests.

This might not sound like something that anyone considers an “event” in any meaning of the word—especially because of all the hellish and torturous pain it causes—but only people who haven't had a study party with their partner would think that. Study parties are anything but torture or pain.

After we'd dated for a little, we planned to study together for our finals, but if midterms were any indication, there was a big problem. Before you bring it up, no, it wasn't the fact that she'd secretly been revering the eraser I'd given her. Sure, that was certainly disgruntling to say the least, but I hadn't found out about that yet. The problem I'm referring to was something much more apparent—our grades.

They had dropped by about five points, which wasn't necessarily *that* bad, but it was enough to serve as a wakeup call to the two of us intoxicated lovebirds who'd only just started dating. We realized that we couldn't keep going like that, so with finals coming up, we put our heads together and came up with a plan to study in a public place.

Of course, you might be thinking that we should have simply studied separately, but that kind of rational decision-making was impossible for two middle schoolers. It was our MO to deal with extraordinary problems with extraordinary measures. Either way, the plan was to save all flirting for *after* finals had ended.

With that decided, we planned to study at a library far enough away that we'd avoid running into anyone we knew. We also agreed to put flirting on hold because silence was strictly enforced there, which prevented middle schoolers from any unscrupulous activity—I mean, normally conversing with each other. This was a stark contrast from the school library we'd regularly rendezvous at, where a certain amount of personal chatter was allowed.

At the new library, we sat next to each other in silence. The only

sound we produced was the turning of pages. *This* was exactly how studying should have been. No nudging each other with our elbows, no “accidentally” brushing each other with our pinkies—just pure studying.

But therein lay the trap. The idea was that since there were people around us, we wouldn’t do anything flirty, but the two of us were foolish, too smitten with each other to realize that this situation was infinitely more dangerous.

It started with Ayai. “Irido-kun, I have a question...” she said in a soft voice while pointing at her textbook.

Because the library was so silent, even whispering sounded kinda loud. Realizing that, Ayai quickly looked around to see if anyone was glaring at her for talking, but luckily, no one was. Not wanting to risk her getting in trouble, I decided to take this conversation to paper, and began writing a response to her. But before I could finish writing out my response, she impatiently moved her chair closer and glanced at me.

Her shoulder brushed against mine, and the sweet fragrance from her hair caressed my nose. Then, she whispered directly in my ear, “Do you...know the answer?”

In this completely silent library, her whisper directly into my ear felt like it grazed my brain. In this public place where we weren’t supposed to talk or touch each other—an extremely restrictive environment—this was too tantalizing for me to hold myself back, no matter how hard I tried. I’d seriously done my best not to talk or touch her, and yet here we were.

I wasn’t sure if she was trying to object to the current situation, but when I glanced at her, I saw her face filled with impatience, her lips pursed, expectation in her eyes.

If she really wanted to talk to me, there was no shortage of options. We could have easily written or messaged each other, but she’d deliberately chosen to whisper into my ear. With her so close to me, I couldn’t stop looking at the slight gleam from her pink lip gloss.

“It’s hard to figure out with just the textbook,” I said. “Want to look for a reference book together?” At the very least, I knew continuing like this was a bad idea.

“Yeah.”

Couples are seriously god-awful. No matter where they are, they’re just thirsty for each other twenty-four seven. I’d go even so far as to say that this is the greatest shame of the human race—the species who prides itself on being the pinnacle of intelligence on this planet. I’m sure that this is something that present Yume would have happily agreed with.

We were now in the shadow of a bookcase, and Ayai’s soft breath

gently brushed against my now slightly glossed lips.

“Heh heh,” she giggled as I just stared at her, dumbfounded. “S-Sorry if I got in your way.”

“No, not at all, but Ayai... You’re pretty wild.”

“I-I’m... Maybe I am.” She put her hands around the back of my neck and smiled a little.

Good grief, why do girls change so much? Just four months ago, she’d been an innocent girl who didn’t even know where babies came from. To be fair, I hadn’t been interested in dating whatsoever four months ago, but now I was falling head over heels for her simple temptations.

Just as Ayai closed her eyes, we heard a high-pitched, but soft, gasp. Quickly turning around, we immediately found that the source of the noise was a small girl who looked to be in elementary school. Her face turned bright red before she slowly backed off and stumbled away, leaving the two of us in a very awkward silence.

Ayai’s face flushed red as a tomato. We let go of each other, acting as if nothing had happened.

“Um...” Ayai looked at the ground, unable to find the rest of her words.

The one silver lining of this situation was that we’d *only* been seen by a small girl. I figured that it might even become an unforgettable memory for us. However, I couldn’t say any of this out loud; my mind still hadn’t settled down even after that sobering encounter.

“Should we...leave?”

“Yeah...”

Our grades did not go up whatsoever. In the end, the fact that we had to endure that embarrassment for nothing was the real torture.



It was now July. The annoying rainy season was but a distant memory as we changed into our summer uniforms. Everyone may have been excited about the freedom that came with short sleeves, but it was hard to get too excited when something else was occupying our minds.

“Higashira, are you gonna be okay with finals?” I’d been curious for a while, so I decided that now would be the best time to ask.

We were in our library spot, and as always, Isana Higashira was reading a light novel. Different than usual though, she was wearing the school’s summer uniform—a short-sleeved dress shirt with a sleeveless vest.

In response, the big-breasted otaku admiring the illustrations of beautiful girls froze as if time had stopped.

“Higashira?”

“Pardon?”

“You’re not fooling anyone.” Playing dumb’s an overdone gimmick in rom-coms.

Higashira let out a pained groan as she clutched her head. “Oh, I... I just remembered!”

“What?”

“I have an urgent task I must complete, so I will be taking my leave—”

“You’re not running away.” I grabbed her by the collar as she tried to make her escape, but she started to flail around, so I locked her neck and shoulders into a hold.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow—I surrender! I surrender!” the close-to-flunking student known as Higashira pleaded.

“The only way this ends is in a KO.”

“A death match?! Th-Then in that case—” Just as I thought she’d stopped fighting back, she began to fidget uncomfortably before sheepishly looking up at me. “M-Mizuto-kun, th-there’s something hard pressing against my rear-end.”

“That’s my phone!”

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!”

Apparently she’d learned some bargaining techniques from Minami-san and *her*, but those tricks wouldn’t work on me. After she’d calmed down enough, I let go and cornered her against the wall, slamming my hands against it so she had nowhere to run.

“So? Are you studying?”

“Um... Is this the sort of question you ask while cornering a girl?”

“Are. You. Studying?” I pressed, moving my face closer to hers.

“I...am not.” She looked away and replied in a shaky voice, as if she was about to burst into tears. “B-But you don’t have to pressure me like this. We’ve yet to even enter the testing period.”

“We’re only given a week to prepare for finals. Do you *really* think you can make something happen in that time? *You*, who probably reads light novels during class.”

Her groan in response told me I was right.

“If you keep failing, you’re gonna get held back. You wanna become my underclassman?”

“Mizuto-senpai...?”

“I can tell you’re starting to like the idea. Stop.”

“P-Please cease talking to me in such a threatening manner. I-It’s making my heart race too much!” Higashira, her face now bright red, began pushing against my chest.

I sighed and moved away from the wall. “I’m just trying to look out for you.”

“Are you...my mother?”

“If you become my underclassman, never again will I lend you textbooks when you forget to bring yours.”

“Ah... That would pose a problem.” The Swiss-cheese-for-brains Isana Higashira made a dejected face while groaning yet again. “But what am I to do? Studying is too difficult in this school. I consider myself to be above average in intelligence, and yet...”

“Sure, you’re smart. That much is proven by the fact that you were accepted to this school. Your problem is with quantity.”

“Quantity?”

“I’m gonna shove all the knowledge you need to improve your grades down your throat.”

Higashira covered her mouth, directed her slovenly gaze diagonally, then said in a soft voice, “You’re going to shove it...down my throat?”

“Knock it off.” *You can’t escape this with your usual dirty jokes.*

With that, I made Isana Higashira promise to come over Saturday around noon.

The following day, I was met with a guy who had an expression as if the world was ending: Kogure Kawanami.

“Oh, god...” His face dropped onto my desk in despair. “Finals... Oh, god...”

“You’re not the type who freaks out about tests but then gets a high score, are you?”

“Hell no, I’m not! I studied my ass off for midterms and just *barely* passed!”

“You have connections, don’t you? Couldn’t you just ask around for tests from last year?”

“The teachers here are clever. They don’t reuse tests! It’s like they already know what I wanna do!”

He was like a character that’d just gained a boost of confidence from defeating an enemy, only to be faced with a new one with a gargantuan difference in power.

“Help me! You’re top of the class! You’re the only one for me!”

“Ew, no. Don’t be such a creep.”

“I’ll treat you to anything you want!”

“Now you’re talking.” *Don’t forget you said* anything. “Well, there is this one out-of-print book that’s going for a pretty penny online...”

“Ugh. Look, I know I might’ve said *anything*, but there’s a limit, okay? You feel me?”

“I can’t even find this book in the secondhand bookstores around here...”

“Listen! There’s a limit! Please understand!”

Well, it wasn’t like I really wanted that book anyway, and he *had*

paid for my clothes the other day. Whatever I decided on, I'd try to make sure to keep it pretty cheap. The only problem was that I already had plans to help Higashira study, and I wasn't about to teach the same things twice.

That's when I came up with the following idea: "Okay, come over to my house Saturday. I'll teach you everything I can."

"I owe you my life, Master!"

"I'm not your master."

Logically, it'd be easier to teach everyone at once. It'd be the first time Kawanami and Higashira would meet, but Kawanami could hit it off with anyone, so I was sure it'd be fine.

Then, Saturday came. I met up with Kawanami and guided him over to my house.

"Hm, so this'll be my first time in the Irido house. Could've been my second if I hadn't been bumped from the visiting list when Irido-san was sick."

"Yeah, it's my first time having a guy over."

"You're saying that like you've had a girl over before."

"Minami-san."

"Oh... You consider her a girl. You're such a nice guy."

If that's all it took, I guess it didn't take much to be considered a nice guy. Simply being able to recognize that Minami-san was a girl had him treating me like I was a benevolent protagonist. How nice. But then again, Minami-san wasn't the only girl I'd had over.

"Well anyway, come in. It's burning out here."

"Yeah, it's frickin' hot," Kawanami said, fanning himself with the collar of his shirt.

The July sun was relentless, so we headed inside.

"Thanks for havin' me. Your parents home?"

"Nope."

"Oh, so these must be Irido-san's shoes." Kawanami noted as he looked down at the women's sneakers in our front entrance.

He was very observant, but those shoes weren't Yume's.

"Looks like she's here already."

"Hm? Who?" Kawanami tilted his head in confusion.

Suddenly, the door to the living room opened, and out of it came a girl with long black hair wearing a maxi skirt. It was my aforementioned little stepsister, Yume Irido. Her mouth opened in surprise, seeing both me and Kawanami.

"Hey there, Irido-san." Kawanami raised his hand slightly, greeting Yume.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wha—" She ran to me, grabbed my arm, and pulled me away from Kawanami to the stairs. "What are you

thinking?! Why is Kawanami-kun here?!" she hissed, for some reason.

Hm? Didn't something like this happen before? "He asked me to help him study."

"Did you forget that you're already helping someone *else* study?!"

"Nope, and I'm happy to see she found her way inside. It'd suck if she had to wait out there till we got back." *I'm so proud of her. She can visit someone else's house all on her own. She's really grown.* "But anyway, it'd be annoying to teach the same things twice, so I figured it'd be more efficient to teach both of them at once." *I'm very satisfied with my inspired thinking.*

I happily nodded, satisfied with my efficiency, but Yume buried her face in her hands like she had a headache. "Oh right... I forgot that you're *this* kind of person!"

"I get the sense that you're mocking me. Wanna take this outside?"

"Whatever! Just take Kawanami-kun to your room! I'll teach Higashira-san in the living room."

"Yume-san?" Higashira called out from the living room. "Has Mizuto-kun returned?"

"H-Hold on! Don't—" But before Yume could finish her sentence, the door to the living room opened, and standing there was Isana Higashira, dressed in the clothes that Minami-san and Yume had picked out for her.

And then, Isana Higashira's and Kogure Kawanami's eyes met. At first, they looked at each other as if they were seeing things, but after they got a good look at each other, their eyes narrowed, their eyebrows rose, and then the questions started.

"Who might you be?"

"Who're you?"

Yume let out a sound of frustration and covered her eyes, which I found strange, so I tilted my head. *What's going on here?*

"My name is Isana Higashira. I am Mizuto-kun's one and only friend."

"Kogure Kawanami. I'm Irido's first and bestest friend."

"Huh?!"

"Say what?!"

The two of them then began a staring contest in my living room.

To my left was Higashira pulling on my arm. "What is the meaning of this, Mizuto-kun?! Who is this frivolous-looking person? This must be some kind of practical joke! *I'm your friend, right?!*"

And to my right was Kawanami shaking my shoulder. "What the hell, Irido! Who's Tits Magoo over here?! What's *she* doing in this sanctuary for you and Irido-san?!"

How had this happened? Higashira was supposed to be shy around anyone she didn't know, and Kawanami was supposed to be friendly to everyone. I never thought I'd see the day that either of them would be antagonistic towards anyone. I seriously couldn't wrap my head around it.

Sure, given Higashira's personality, she might not have been able to get along with a frivolous guy like Kawanami, and Kawanami might not have had many dealings with a girl like Higashira, but I hadn't expected a situation where they'd both be tugging and yelling at me.

Meanwhile, Yume looked at me while whispering into her phone. "Akatsuki-san, please help!"

It was doubtful that I was gonna get help anytime soon, so I exhaled and pulled myself away from the two of them. "Okay, calm down. You two seem to be under some kind of misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding?" they said in unison.

"Kawanami, this girl is Isana Higashira. She's a friend I made recently who's just like me. We have the same tastes and everything."

"A recent friend that's just like you?" Kawanami repeated inquisitively.

"Higashira, this is Kogure Kawanami. He calls himself my best friend and follows me around without me even asking."

"Without even asking...?" Higashira parroted.

Higashira and Kawanami sized each other up, creases appearing in their brows as they leered at each other. I honestly had no clue what kind of misunderstanding they had. I figured that as long as I laid out the cold, hard facts, they'd regain their composure, and everything'd be cleared up.

However, all I'd done was muddy the waters even further.

"I see. So this person is your stalker, Mizuto-kun."

"Ah, so she's scammin' you, Irido."

"What the hell is wrong with you two?!" *Were you listening to a thing I said?!*

Higashira pulled my arm, sandwiching it between the two soft globes on her chest. Usually, she'd react in some way if I touched them, but instead she gave Kawanami a death glare as if she was a watchdog protecting her owner. "Please keep your distance, stalker. Mizuto-kun is *my* friend. I will not relinquish him to anyone!"

"How about you get your filthy paws off him, you scammer!" Kawanami's eyes lit up with rage as if he wanted to kill her, and he pointed his finger angrily at Higashira. "You might've thought he's an easy mark 'cuz he's an otaku, but Irido's not as easy as you think! How about you give up before you hurt your fragile pride?"

"Agh! T-To think you'd attack my unhealed wounds so relentlessly like that."

“Heh, looks like the tables have turned! Sucks, don’t it? Know your place and cry for me, interloper!”

“U-Ugh... M-Mizuto-kun!!!” Higashira, on the verge of tears, hid behind me.

Things’d gotten too out of hand. Even I couldn’t ignore them anymore.

“Sorry, but can you stop bullying Higashira, Kawanami?”

“What?! You’re siding with *her*?!”

“There aren’t any sides here. I’m not sure what’s got you so riled up, but we have a promise that if she gets bullied, I’ll get bullied along with her.”

“M-Mizuto-kun...”

“Sorry to interrupt when Higashira-san is fawning over you, but if you’re going to get bullied with her, you might as well just stop it at its source!” the girl with a bad personality quipped, but I ignored her.

“True, I might have rejected her, but I think we should respect the fact that she had the courage to confess in the first place. You shouldn’t be making fun of her for it. Check yourself, Kawanami.”

“Huh?! Oh god, are you actually mad at me?”

“Kawanami-kun,” Yume added, “I’m not sure what you’re so hung up on, but I think you should apologize. For some reason, he’s very defensive of her.”

Of course I am. She’s my friend. Isn’t it normal to get twice as mad when a friend is being hurt?

But even so, Kawanami still showed no sign of relaxing until I stared him down for a bit. Only then did he finally hang his head in defeat.

“Sorry. I lost my cool.”

“You heard him. What about you, Higashira?”

“I will forgive him out of consideration for the extremely unfashionable, wildly styled weeds that he calls hair.”

“What’d you say?! She’s not hurt at all!”

“Eek! M-Mizuto-kun!”

“Kawanami...”

“I... I’m so sorry.” Kawanami bowed his head again, asking for forgiveness. *Well it’s all good as long as you understand.*



“Huh?! Irido, look! She’s sticking her tongue out at me!”

“Hm?” I glanced at Higashira, but all I saw was her shivering in fear. “Lying about her’s not scoring you any points,” I said.

“I’m not lying! What the hell’s going on?! Did Irido go crazy when I wasn’t looking?!” Kawanami asked, directing his question at Yume.

“H-Hm... I don’t really know either.”

Every last one of you is so heartless. I’d done absolutely nothing out of the ordinary.

“Let’s get to studying,” I insisted. “Open your textbooks. We don’t have much time.”

“What? This is where we’ll be studying?” Higashira asked, pouting. “I’d prefer your room, Mizuto-kun. I would have liked to explore more of your bookcase...”

“Sure, *after* finals are over.”

“Yay!” Higashira happily sat at the living room table, taking out her notebook and textbooks.

“Ugh... This is a nightmare,” Kawanami moaned from behind me.

“Why do you look like you’re in so much pain, Kawanami-kun?” Yume wondered.

After some commotion, our study party commenced as scheduled.

“It’s good to read into our school’s modern Japanese tests,” I explained. “For example, look at this practice question. If you use this part from this passage...”

“You need to learn *how* to use the formulas. Memorizing them without knowing how they work will only make you more confused. Now hurry up and move your hands!”

I hadn’t, however, accounted for Yume helping and cutting my work in half. Truth be told, I’d been a little worried about teaching two people at once since I’d never done it before, so this was really helpful. Sure, there was an occasional groan or two from Higashira and Kawanami, but having two of us teaching meant it was hard for them to interject often. The studying experience was even smoother than I’d expected.

“Phew, I’m feeling fatigued.” Higashira said, slumping onto the table.

“Heh. If this is enough to make you give up, you’ve got no chance of hangin’ with the top student of our grade.” Kawanami sneered at Higashira while gesturing to me.

“I believe that just as there is beauty in height differences, there is beauty in grade differences.”

“You’re crazy. Equal is best! It’s crazy outdated for girls to be timidly hidin’ behind a guy’s back.”

“Huh?!”

“You heard me!”

Sparks seemed like they were about to fly from Higashira and Kawanami, but I wasn't going to get involved. It felt like I was in an hour-long time loop in which they kept fighting about the same things over and over. Ultimately, I'd decided to just let them have at it—as long as they didn't cross any lines, that is.

“How about a break? I'll get some tea,” Yume said, standing up.

I saw this as a golden opportunity, so I got up too and followed her to the kitchen.

“Why are you coming too?” Yume stared daggers at me.

“I want to get away from those two.”

“You're leaving them by themselves?! Is that really a good idea?” she asked, looking back. They were still territorially staring each other down.

We arrived at the kitchen, and Yume reached for the teapot. I followed suit and grabbed the can of tea leaves from the shelf above.

“Higashira-san aside, why on earth is *Kawanami-kun* acting like that?”

“You're better off not knowing. Just don't do anything unexpected,” I said, taking the teapot and opening the tea leaves.

“Excuse me? When have I ever done anything unexpected?”

“If anything, I'm confused why *Higashira's* acting like that.”

I could kinda guess the reasoning behind Kawanami's behavior from our conversations. He was basically an otaku who got mad because his favorite character was acting differently than he'd expected.

That being said, I had no clue what was going through Higashira's head. She was a timid person, so it was hard to imagine her having such animosity towards someone she didn't even know.

“She's afraid that she's going to lose your friendship to someone else,” Yume said, filling our electric kettle with water.

“Isn't she friends with you and Minami-san?” I asked, dropping the tea leaves into the teapot.

“Well...” she started before being interrupted by the whistling kettle. “Try thinking about it yourself. You could bear to be a little more thoughtful.”

“Hmph. I'm better than a certain someone who doesn't have a shred of kindness.”

“Excuse me?! ”

I swiped the electric kettle that she was holding and poured its contents into the teapot. “In the first place, you shouldn't be lecturing me about my relationship with Higashira. *You're* the overprotective one. Feel some kinship with her or something?”

“I doubt you know this, but it's normal for people to worry about

their friends. Though I can't deny that there are some things I share with her..."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"Like..."

"The fetish of having people put your socks on for you?"

"W-Wait, that wasn't a—" Yume reflexively grabbed my arm, making my hands unsteady. Boiling water splashed on my finger.

"Ah—"

"S-Sorry! Are you okay?!"

I quickly set the teapot down and shook the affected hand. The tip of my index finger had only turned red; it wasn't anything too serious. All I needed to do was run it under some cold water and—

"Sh-Show me!" she demanded.

It all happened so fast that I had no time to react, *especially* not to what she did next. She gripped my hand and pulled it close. Time froze as my burnt, tender finger entered her mouth, and I felt a warm, soft, wet sensation envelop it. All brain function came to a complete stop.

A good five seconds had passed by the time my brain processed where my finger was. I had to see it to believe it, so I fixed my gaze on her lips around my finger.

"Wh-Wha?!" As I quickly yanked my finger out of her mouth, there was a brief instant where I saw a strand of saliva stretch between us. Seeing it stretch and then break made my cheeks so hot, I felt like I'd been splashed in the *face* with boiling water.

"Hm?" Yume tilted her head in confusion.

"Wh-What are you doing?!"

"W-Well, mom always used to do this for me whenever I got hurt."

"You don't *lick* burns—you *cool* them!"

"Ah..." Yume's eyes narrowed before she froze.

It had finally dawned on her that all her actions had done was make it seem like she was the kind of girl who wanted to suck on a guy's finger. *I seem to remember a certain someone denying that they ever do anything unexpected. What happened to that?!*

"Well, well, well..."

"Wow."

The gears in my head hadn't gone back to their normal operations yet, but they ground to a complete halt after hearing those two voices. Peeking at us from the other side of the kitchen counter were Kogure Kawanami with a wide grin and Isana Higashira with her hand over her mouth.

Then, the two of them started talking in the exact same teasing tone despite having a silent glaring contest earlier.

“Irido-san is a lot dirtier than I thought.”

“Yume-san plays the honor student but is secretly quite the deviant.”

“Why did you choose *now* to stop fighting?! I can explain! I-I just lost my head and—” Yume turned bright red and shot me a pleading look, but I ignored her and ran my finger under water.

I could wash away the pain and saliva from the finger and pray that my memories would disappear too, but there was nothing I could do about the two troublesome people who’d witnessed this event. Even if Yume and I tried to forget that this had happened, those two wouldn’t let us. Although, I guess I should be happy that it was these two who saw us and not *her*.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of the sliding door facing our garden slide open.

The four of us jumped and went quiet. Standing in the doorway was a small-framed girl with a ponytail—a bona fide intruder.

“Heya, Yume-chan! I’m here to save you!”

A chill ran up my spine as I saw the smiling face of Akatsuki Minami.

“Oh, Kawanami! What’re yooouuu doin’ here? Heh heh. More importantly...I couldn’t help but overhear something about Yume-chan being ‘dirty’ and a ‘deviant.’ Explain.”

In the blink of an eye, Kawanami and I grabbed our stuff and tried to escape.

“Heh heh. There’s nowhere to run.”

“So, let’s recap. There’s nothing between Higashira-san and Irido-kun anymore. They’re just good friends. *You’re* the one thinking impure thoughts because you have a filthy mind, Kawanami. Got it?”

“You’ve got the filthiest mind of all...” Kawanami quipped while being forced to face the ground.

“Hm?” Minami-san dug her foot into his back, and Kawanami screamed.

“It’s just as you said. Mizuto-kun and I are the *ultimate* friends,” Higashira-san said, wrapping her arms around me. “It must be so embarrassing for you to have a love-addled brain *and* a frivolous appearance. This just goes to show that extroverts have no chance at understanding the subtleties of the human heart or appropriate physical distance between friends.”

“Um, Higashira-san, you of all people shouldn’t be preaching about appropriate physical distance. Get off,” Yume insisted, pulling her away from me.

Higashira looked thoroughly disappointed, but I was happy to have her off of me. It was summer, and physical contact like that just

made the heat worse, especially from her extremely sweaty chest.

Minami-san spun around and directed her scolding gaze at Higashira. "Higashira-san, you can't complain just because your friend's buddy-buddy with someone else. Nobody likes clingy girls. You're gonna get shit-talked behind your back."

"B-But Mizuto-kun would never say anything bad about me."

"I wouldn't count on it. One day he might be all like, 'God, that bitch's so clingy.'"

"What?!" Higashira turned her eyes to me for reassurance, so I had no choice but to live up to her expectations.

"That bitch's so clingy," I joked.

"Wh-Wh-Wha— M-My deepest apologies!!!" she curled into a ball.

Oh crap, I might have gone too far. I gently patted her back to comfort her.

"Please pat my head."

"Uh-huh."

"Please help me blow my nose."

"Uh-huh."

"Please buy me Häagen-Dazs."

"Uh-huh."

"I thought you were overprotective, but you're actually just her gofer." My little stepsister shot me a scornful look, but I was happy to do all of this to keep Higashira's fragile mental state intact.

"Yeah, nobody likes a clingy girl." Kawanami smirked at Minami-san.

"Oh? Got somethin' you wanna say?" Minami-san asked, meeting Kawanami's gaze with a chilling glare.

"Nope. Looks like I don't need to."

"Jerkwad..." Minami-san said under her breath before whipping her head towards me, her ponytail violently swishing. "So then, Irido-kun," she began, leaning over me, "I just have one question for you."

"Yeah?"

"Did that turn you on?"

Her question was so direct that I practically choked on my spit.

"Did Yume-chan licking your finger turn you on? What, cat got your tongue? Or maybe you're not saying anything 'cause you don't wanna admit it? So what is it? C'mon, tell me. Tell me, tell me, tell me!"

"A-Akatsuki-san? C-Could you stop? You're embarrassing *me* too!" Yume said as she tried to pull Akatsuki-san back.

"You're a horny bastard, Irido-kun! I *know* you are! Why do all these good things *only* happen to you?!" Minami-san screamed out.

"You speak true. Mizuto-kun is surprisingly dirty."

"Don't spread such baseless lies, Higashira," I said, pointing at

her.

And then, out of nowhere, Higashira took my hand and stuck my finger in her mouth, leaving everyone present in complete and utter shock.

“Wath thith how she did ith?” Higashira asked, sucking on my finger.

“Nah, this feels like a dog licking me.”

“Insolence!” Higashira exclaimed, spitting out my finger and violently beginning to slap me on my shoulders. This just exaggerated the dog analogy, to be honest.

“I see...” Kawanami muttered before standing up. Despite enduring the torture of Minami-san, he seemed perfectly fine.

“Goin’ home?” I asked, looking up at him.

“Yeah. Can’t really study with all these people here anyway. I’ll just take that bite-sized yandere to go.”

“Who’re you callin’ a yandere?! You’re the one with a problem, you perv!”

“Uh-huh.”

Kawanami grabbed Minami from Yume’s hold and picked her up like a princess, much to the surprised and delighted squeals of both Yume and Higashira.

Of course, Minami-san tried to fight back, but Kawanami didn’t even flinch. He was completely unfazed, as if he’d done this a million times. If anything, I felt bad for Minami-san. As he carried her out of the room, she flailed so much that she hit her hand against the wall.

We followed after them to see them off. Before leaving, Kawanami looked at us...or more specifically, he looked at Higashira-san and said, “Your name’s Higashira, right? I’ll let you off the hook for today.”

“Why’re you trying to act cool?!” Minami-san continued to pound against Kawanami as he walked out.

“That is *my* line,” Higashira said, sticking her tongue out as the door closed. “You’ll not survive our next encounter.”

“You should say that when he can hear you.”

She let out a huff and looked away. *I guess there’s always that one person you don’t get along with.*

“I still don’t get what Kawanami-kun got so worked up over,” Yume wondered, letting out a sigh while folding her arms.

“Would anything be different if you did?”

“Huh?” Yume shot me a confused expression, making me realize that I’d slipped up.

“Forget it.” I averted my eyes and pushed Higashira on the back. “Come on. Let’s get back to studying.”

“Pardon?! I thought we were done for the day!”

“Now that Kawanami’s gone, there aren’t any obstacles to your studying.”

“I do not wish to study any longer!”

I felt Yume looking at me, but I pretended not to notice and sat in front of Higashira back at the table with her textbook and notebook.



That night, I got a call from Kawanami.

“Sorry for makin’ a scene today.”

“Yeah, you should be. Never do that again.”

“No promises. My instincts tell me that Higashira is my enemy.”

Why’d he have to go and make things so complicated? The situation had only gotten worse since they were fighting over me for some reason.

“Well, don’t worry about it. It’s nothin’ serious. I’m a ROM expert, remember? I’m satisfied just watchin’.”

“I don’t get it. Are we really that much fun?”

“Are you? Hm... Good question. It’s not like you guys have me in stitches or anything.”

Suddenly, Minami-san’s face flashed in the back of my mind—her expression whenever she looked at Kawanami and talked to him, and when she would try to hold back when she went too far. Every one of those times, Kawanami had the same sarcastic smile on his face.

“Don’t tell me...” I immediately considered not completing this thought, but I did anyway. “You’re trying to use us to lessen the sting of your lingering feelings?”

“No.” He immediately rejected my theory. It was impossible to see what expression he was making over the phone, but this was the first time since meeting him that I thought I heard sincerity in his voice.

“No, that’s not it. Don’t look down on me, Irido.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” I immediately apologized for my rudeness and hung up the phone.

There’s something called the “observer effect” where by observing a target, you alter their state in some way. Well, this was a term from the world of physics, so it may not have been applicable to psychology. However, there were a decent number of people who were affected by what other people thought about them.

If someone thought they weren’t very talkative, they’d start trying to converse more. Two people might become a couple if enough people think they are. Being chained by the views of other people is annoying. Living without those kinds of pressures must be spectacular.

I stared at my phone for a while before opening LINE to send Higashira a message.

Me: Are you studying?

Izanami: I am in the middle of learning that Nobunaga Oda was actually a woman.

Me: There's so much to cover. I have no clue why you're slacking.

Then for some reason she sent me a random smug-face sticker, making me frown a little.

Minami Akatsuki Won't Talk About It

“Let's go to the bathroom, Yume-chan!”

In what could only be described as a folly of youth, I had a so-called boyfriend during eighth and ninth grade. There were a myriad of different reasons our relationship started declining, so it would be hard to pinpoint just one.

If I had to guess, the decline began when I started to make friends. During the three months of our summer vacation, he and I lived in our own world. It was so comfortable and blissful that I didn't want a single person to barge in. But ultimately, I was the one who tore it all down.

Before anything else, let me say that I don't think I was wrong in the slightest, even if it might've been the catalyst for the end of our relationship. Sure, if it hadn't happened, we might have stayed together, and our disgusting trysts in our own little world would've continued, but as soon as I learned about the world outside our bubble, I came to the conclusion that what we were doing wasn't very healthy.

If either of us had decided to expand our world... If we'd been more open-minded... Basically, if our relationship had been even just a little healthier... If I hadn't been so jealous then...

No. There was no point in dwelling on the past. The only thing that was certain was the fact that I'd known what the world outside our bubble was like. I knew what it was like to be jealous and to inspire jealousy.

At the very least, I could make use of that experience now. As a result, I'd be able to give at least some meaning to that embarrassing past of ours. That gave me some solace...but honestly, not too much.



“Higashira-san, that's not the right formula.”

“Huh? Oh... It certainly isn't.”

“Don't just go through the motions. When you take the test, stay awake and keep double-checking your work until the very end.”

Higashira-san made a very dissatisfied sound and blew bubbles in

her orange juice. We were currently studying for our first semester finals at a family restaurant. It was Higashira-san, myself, and...Akatsuki-san, who was currently staring intently at Higashira-san from across the table.

Though she may have been mixing her drink with her straw, there wasn't anything left but some ice. And she was apparently still on the same page as when we'd sat down. Akatsuki-san had placed within the top fifty on midterms, so there wasn't really much that I could teach her, meaning I could focus on Higashira-san, but...

"Akatsuki-san? Um, your cup's empty."

"Hm? Oh, you're right."

"Is there something you want to ask?"

"No, not really. I'm all good! For reals! I'm gonna grab another drink. You guys want anything?" Akatsuki-san asked, and then headed to the drink bar.

I watched as she shrank in the distance.

"What's the matter, Yume-san? Is your stomach in pain?" I must have made a sound because Higashira-san looked concerned.

"No... I was just thinking that she's acting strange."

On the surface, she may have seemed the same bright and cheerful Akatsuki Minami, but there was something off about her.

"Phew, it's time to rest." Higashira-san pulled out her phone as I turned around to look at Akatsuki-san.

"I'm confiscating that."

"No, Yume-san! A phone is the very lifeblood of girls our age!"

You can play on your phone after we're done studying.

The next day at school, after first period, Akatsuki-san came up to me and said with a full smile on her face, "Yume-chan, let's go to the bathroom!"

My immediate reaction was that she didn't have to ask in such a loud voice, but I peered over at my little stepbrother and saw that he was already deep in the world of books. Then again, there wasn't much reason for me to hide that I went to the bathroom anymore, especially now that we were living together.

"Sure. I kinda need to go too."

In the past, I'd never understood why girls went to the bathroom in groups, but now I did. The girls' bathroom was a sanctuary for girls—one that boys weren't allowed in. When I was in ninth grade, thanks to my friend, I learned how much time girls spent in the bathroom gossiping.

And it's not just that there were no boys—there was also some privacy from the general public. All sorts of topics of discussion were possible in that semi-enclosed space.

“So, like, during gym...” Akatsuki-san started.

“Uh huh.”

“And *that* happened.”

“No way!”

“Not cool, right?”

“For real.”

After finishing our “business,” we stood in front of the mirror and touched up our makeup while chatting... Well, she did most of the chatting. I just kinda stood there and nodded. It was impressive how she could just go from topic to topic without stopping.

As soon as the bell rang, we went back to the classroom. When second period ended, Akatsuki-san immediately came back up to me.

“Yume-chan, let’s go to the bathroom!”

She has to go again? Or maybe she wants to talk more? Personally, I wanted to use our break time to study, but I couldn’t leave her out to dry.

“So, like,” Akatsuki-san began.

“Mm-hmm.”

“And *that* happened!”

“No way!”

“Not cool, right?!”

“For real.”

Then third period ended.

“Yume-chan, let’s go to the bathroom!”

Aren’t you peeing a little too much?! Of course, I knew her objective was actually to talk with me privately, but couldn’t she take it easy? Had Akatsuki-san always been this much of a bathroom person?

“Sorry, but I think I’m gonna study a bit...” I refused her invitation because there was something I wanted to look over.

“Oh, gotcha. Sorry, it’s all good! Good luck!” She smiled, waved her hand at me, and moved to a different friend.

I observed her for a bit, but she didn’t invite anybody else to the bathroom.

“There’s something wrong with Akatsuki-san,” I declared over the phone.

It was now nighttime, and I was in the privacy of my own room talking to the guy in the room next to mine. This was a precaution to prevent our parents from being suspicious about us talking at night.

“Seriously? I was wondering why you were calling me despite never calling me, and it’s for *this*? There’s *always* something wrong with Minami-san.” He didn’t even try to hide his annoyance.

“What do you mean? If anything, there’s always something wrong with you, Higashira-san, and Kawanami-kun.”

“To each their own.”

“Ever since we started studying for finals, she’s been strangely clingy.” I clutched my pillow against my chest as I explained my feelings.

“She’s always been clingy.”

“No! Not at all!”

“You really have no clue...” Even though I couldn’t see his face, I could tell he was furrowing his brows. “Actually, why the hell am I the person you’re talking to about this?”

“Kawanami-kun and Akatsuki-san are childhood friends, right? I thought you might be able to figure something out.”

“You want me to be your messenger boy? Hm, well I guess Kawanami might know something.”

“Right?”

“But, I dunno...”

“About what?”

“Well, he’s kinda in the fight for his life right now against finals.”

“Ah...”

“I’d rather not split his focus.”

“Right... You have a point.”

It wasn’t right for me to bother him about this, especially when all I had was a gut feeling.

“Well, if there’s anything observably off about her, let me know. For example, if she spam calls you in the middle of the night.”

“Are you talking about me? I don’t spam call you!”

“To each their own.”

Can he even breathe without exhaling sarcasm? I tried thinking of something to say back, and then I remembered something that made my lips curl into a smirk.

“Speaking of late-night calls, I seem to remember a certain someone calling me every night, and—”

Suddenly, I heard a beep, signaling that he’d hung up. I triumphantly smiled, reveling in my victory. Back in the day, he’d called me a whole lot more often after I made a friend, because we’d started to spend less time together. Could he have been jealous? Looking back at his behavior back then, I thought it was pretty cute.

“Jealousy...?”

Then suddenly, I started thinking about how Akatsuki-san had only started acting strangely after we began studying for finals—right when I started helping Higashira-san study.

“No way... Right?” I chuckled and put my phone on its charging stand.

There was no way that someone with a ton of friends like Akatsuki-san could be jealous of that. I was just being overly self-

conscious for no reason.

Or so I'd thought. With each day, Akatsuki-san's antics escalated.

"Akatsuki-san?" I prompted.

"What's up, Yume-chan?"

"I'm a little warm."

"Ah, my bad!" Akatsuki-san finally let go of my arm, chugged her water, and then clung onto my arm again.

"I cooled down my body temperature. All better, right?"

"Uh..." *That's not the point! I'm trying to study here, but I can't even write like this!*

This was not a normal distance for friends, unless you were using Mizuto and Higashira-san as a reference. *Hm? Wait, does that mean that what they're doing is actually okay?* I'd based my assumptions off of them not having experience with friends, but if Akatsuki-san was doing this, then maybe their actions were normal?

"I see. Spectacular display of yuri. I'd expect nothing less of my mentor. When you do something, you do it correctly," Isana Higashira said nonchalantly. "However, in my opinion, while being in such close proximity is nice, I believe that keeping a close distance but not exactly touching is much more stimulating."

"Not happening! We're such good friends that we can be as close to each other as we want! Right?"

"I...guess?"

She was right that we were good friends at least, and it made me happy to hear those words come out of her mouth. That being said, I felt like we had a different understanding of what being good friends entailed.

"But regardless of how strong of a relationship you have, it must be annoying to have someone all over you like that, is it not?" Higashira-san thoughtlessly asked while sipping her juice.

Both Akatsuki-san and I focused on Higashira-san's expressionless face. I had three things we wanted to say to her. One: the word "annoying" shouldn't be used so casually. Two: she needed a reality check, because she was all over Mizuto. Three: this really wasn't the time for her to be drinking juice.

But Akatsuki-san jumped off of me before I could say any of this out loud.

"Wait... Huh? Have I..." Akatsuki-san was suddenly at a loss for words and squeezed her fists.

I figured I should say something to smooth the situation over, but Akatsuki-san continued before I could find the words.

"Y-Yume-chan... Have I asked you to go to the bathroom a lot recently?"

“W-Well... You ask me at the end of each period.”

“Have I been clinging to you whenever we walk together?”

“Well... Yes?”

“Have I been sending you more LINE messages than usual?”

“Probably...?”

I had no clue what constituted as “usual,” but at the very least, I could tell that there had been a lot of messages.

“Oh, uh... Ah ha ha...” Akatsuki-san began laughing embarrassedly and immediately shoved all her things into her bag. “Sorry, Yume-chan, but I’m gonna go home! Seriously, sorry,” she said in a soft voice.

She stood up, left enough money to cover all our drinks, and ran out of the family restaurant.

“Have I done something I shouldn’t have again?” Higashira-san asked while watching Akatsuki-san disappear. She finished off her juice.

“It would seem so.”

“Apologies...” Higashira-san said dejectedly.

Understandably, she felt pretty down after that, so I got a refill for her.

The next day, Akatsuki-san became a lot less clingy. She didn’t stop talking to me or anything, though. She greeted me in the morning, ate lunch with me, and walked home with me after school. It was as if everything was back to normal. In regards to the actual incident the previous day, she apologized and said that she’d apologized to Higashira-san too.

It was as if she was forcefully trying to end the conversation single-handedly, just like how she’d forced me to accept her paying for all of us at the restaurant. Everything was seriously back to normal, like nothing had happened. But even so, things didn’t feel like they’d *actually* returned to normal.

As much as I wanted to press this issue further, I wasn’t afforded the opportunity to do so, thanks to finals.

“Well, if it isn’t Ms. Second Place,” Mizuto annoyingly called out to me as we passed each other in the hall of our home that night.

“What do you want, Mr. First Place?”

“Things must be going well. I don’t see a single bag under your eye.”

“I didn’t have any last time either! Do you even have the time to study now that you’re tutoring Kawanami-kun?”

“I’m a master of time management. I’ve got all the time in the world, unlike someone who only knows how to cram their schedule and micromanage their every last second of time.”

“Hmph. I’ll have you know that I am following a proper plan. I won’t lose points just because I get some weird assumptions in my head, unlike a certain somebody.”

We stared at each other for a little bit before we went our separate ways. I left towards the stairs, and Mizuto headed towards the bathroom.

Ugh, why can’t you just tell me not to overdo it like a normal person? But I swore to myself that I’d keep to a normal schedule and overtake him.

When finals rolled around, I wasn’t sleep-deprived like I had been during midterms. I was in absolutely perfect condition. So when the results were posted, I looked up from the lowest to highest, making sure that I hadn’t dropped down. I continued this all the way up to the top spot, where I finally saw my name.

1st Yume Irido

2nd Mizuto Irido

“You did it!”

“You reclaimed the top spot!”

One after another, my friends congratulated me, but I still couldn’t believe it. My name was really above his. I suddenly felt shaky on my feet. I never thought I could win against him, but I had. I quickly looked around to try and find him, and finally saw him outside of the crowd of students. He was being patted on the shoulder by a smiling Kawanami-kun. He must’ve gotten annoyed, because he slapped his hand away.

Then, he turned around and silently left with Kawanami-kun, who shrugged his shoulders. Maybe it was just my imagination, but it looked like he was dragging his feet.

I did it! I did it! I did it!!! I screamed internally, before finally crying out, “I did it!!!”

I’d won. I’d finally won! I’d beaten him! I squeezed my hands against my chest as if to try and contain the happiness that was ready to burst out from inside me. *Did you see? Did you see that?! I’m not going to be one step behind you forever!*

I’d lost last time because I’d pushed myself beyond my limits. It was kinda ironic that I’d won this time even after splitting my time to tutor Higashira-san. Maybe this was because I hadn’t bitten off more than I could chew.

Oh, right. I needed to check to see how Higashira-san did. Had she made it into the top fifty? I hadn’t noticed because I had only been looking for my name, so I decided to check the results again. As far as I could see, though, her name wasn’t there. I told myself that the next time we studied, we’d make it a personal goal for her to score in the top fifty.

“Huh?” Then it struck me. I’d gone up and down the list, but I hadn’t seen Akatsuki-san’s name either.

“Yume-san! I passed!” Higashira-san held out her test score as if it were a badge of honor, tears in her eyes. “Now I have successfully avoided compulsory supplementary classes. You have my thanks!” She seemed very happy despite her below-average grade.

“How about we aim to get this up by about twenty points next time?”

“Huh? No, I couldn’t possibly trouble you again.”

“Oh, there’s no need to be so reserved.”

“I wish to study no longer!”

Higashira-san seemed very unwilling, but could she really show her parents her barely passing grades when report cards came out?

“Higashira-san, excuse me for prying, but...”

“Huh?! A-Are you going to continue this conversation? Does something about my face entice you to bully me?!”

“Hm, I guess so.”

“Really?!”

“No, that’s not what I was going to say. I’m just surprised that you got into this school with your test scores. You must’ve studied really hard for the entrance exam.”

As a student who came from a no-name public school, I had had to try really hard to pass the test to earn my scholarship, so I can only imagine what it had been like for Higashira-san. It was beyond me how someone as self-indulgent as she could have passed.

“Oh, that’s what you’d like to inquire about?” Higashira-san slightly hung her head and twiddled her fingers.

“If it’s hard to say, you don’t have to.”

“Oh, no, it’s not. It’s just... How do I explain this? I guess I had expectations or delusions?”

“Huh?”

“Well, I believed that if I went to a smart school, then I’d be able to converse with like-minded people. Heh heh...” Higashira-san giggled, slightly embarrassed. “You must think I’m quite foolish to have tried so hard just to be in my desired environment. Understandable, because I immediately realized once school began that I had difficulty making friends not because there was nobody like me, but because I’m a terrible communicator. I-I apologize for having such a senseless reason.”

“Not at all,” I immediately responded, warmly shaking my head in understanding. “It’s not senseless at all. I completely understand how you felt. Who doesn’t want to believe that there’s someone out there who completely gets them?”

“Y-You mean it?”

“Of course. Plus, you weren’t wrong, were you?”

“Huh?”

“Thanks to you working your butt off, you met Akatsuki-san, *him*, and me, right?”

Higashira-san blinked her eyes for a little in surprise before the ends of her lips bent slightly. She fidgeted. “Eheh heh heh.”

“Hey, don’t just clam up out of embarrassment! You’re making me embarrassed too!” I fanned my now red face with my hand.

“Hm, now that I think about it, where is Minami-san? She isn’t with you?” Higashira-san asked, tilting her head.

How are you already back to normal?!

“We’re not a pair, you know?”

“Oh, really? I thought you two were similar to Mizuto-kun and myself.”

“You have quite the imagination...”

When did she get that idea in her head? Then again, Akatsuki-san was undoubtedly my closest friend.

“I sent her a message earlier, but she hasn’t responded or even read the message.”

“C-Could she still be bitter about my words that day?”

“I doubt it. Didn’t she apologize?”

“Yes, but...she is all right, isn’t she?”

As much as I wanted to tell her she was worrying too much, I completely understood where she was coming from, as someone who used to be shy like her. The tiniest things you say can stick with you forever. It’d probably be best if Higashira-san saw Akatsuki-san sometime today too—

“Heya! You guys talkin’ shit?”

Higashira-san jumped and practically screamed at the sudden voice behind us, which belonged to none other than Akatsuki-san.

“Where have you been? I sent you a message.”

“Really? My bad. I’ve been all over the place.”

Higashira-san let out a sigh of relief. “Phew, I was under the impression that you...”

“That I what?”

“Oh, nothing! Forget I said anything!”

“You’re just makin’ me more curious!” Akatsuki-san said teasingly before wrapping herself around Higashira-san and making obscene gestures around the bountiful mounds on her chest.

She was acting exactly as she usually did.

“Oh, right! I heard that you got first, Yume-chan! Congrats!” Akatsuki-san must’ve had her fill because she let go of Higashira-san and turned her attention to me.

“Thank you. How did—” But before I could finish my sentence, I was interrupted.

“How were your final exam results?” Higashira-san asked.

“Me? Hm, well...” Akatsuki-san began laughing weakly. “I kinda let my guard down this time. I didn’t do so hot.”

“Oh, have I found a poor-grade comrade?” Higashira-san’s eyes sparkled in excitement.

“I probably did better than you, but I shoulda had Yume-chan teach me too.” Akatsuki-san snuck a glance at me. “But maybe I woulda just been a burden.” That was the single opening that Akatsuki-san showed me.

It was the one crack in the tough armor that was her “everyday facade.” If there really wasn’t anything wrong with her, there was no way she’d show even the slightest opening. Usually, she’d nonchalantly get my approval and trick me into promising to tutor her.

But right now, it was like she was afraid of something. But what? Fear of being rejected by me? No, that couldn’t have been it. I’d gotten a glimpse of her true thoughts. She was scared about being a burden.

This was the first time in so long that I was happy I’d had a boyfriend in middle school. Thanks to that experience, I could read between the lines.

“No.” I shook my head. “You’d never be a burden. Let’s get into the top ten together next semester, Akatsuki-san.”

“Really? Thanks! Top ten might be a teeny bit hard, though.” Akatsuki-san laughed normally.

She probably wouldn’t be honest with me no matter how much I asked, so it was up to me to try and guess her feelings. But I could do that, so it was fine.

“All right. I will be taking my leave now. I’d like to tease Mizutokun now that he’s dropped down the standings.”

“Don’t. He’ll get mad at you for real.”

“That prospect is equally as exciting! Farewell!” Higashira-san sped off to the library.

As usual, she wasn’t great at asserting herself, but she was resilient. She wasn’t quiet, but rather someone who moved at her own pace. After all, sometimes she could say the worst things because she wasn’t able to read the room.

“We’re alone, huh?” Akatsuki-san looked up at me and fidgeted a little.

“True. Let’s go home.”

“You’re so dense!” Akatsuki-san laughed and patted me on the shoulder.

I joined in her laughter. It'd been three months since the start of the first semester. It had taken that long for us to build our own conversational rhythm. It was doubtful we'd ever lose this comfortable back-and-forth, no matter what happened.

Akatsuki-san wasn't awkward like I or *he*. Even if I was a little rude, showed my flaws, put on airs, or hid myself, she'd just treat me the same as normal the next day. But it was precisely because she was like that that I had the courage to say what I needed to.

"Let's get goin' then. Maki-chan and Nasuka-chan both have club today, so—"

"Akatsuki-san!"

"Whoa! What? What?!" Akatsuki-san whipped around, a surprised look plastered across her face.

I took a deep breath, steeled my will, and then courageously said these words for the first time in my entire life: "Do you want to go to karaoke?"

"Wow, this is the first time I've been here with just one other person."

"M-Me too."

"Why're you so nervous?" Akatsuki-san asked, shooting me a teasing smile as she stood in front of our room while I entered. It was as if she was waiting for me to choose a seat.

I looked around and decided to sit on the right-hand side at the edge of the couch. Akatsuki-san followed suit and sat one space away from me. I was honestly surprised, given her track record. She'd clung to my arm at the family restaurant. Something was *seriously* wrong.

Something had changed in her ever since Higashira-san's statement. Maybe she couldn't get that out of her head, and that's why her test score dropped. Suddenly, it was all clear to me. I took a deep breath.

I was not a skilled speaker. I could only say maybe ten percent of what I actually wanted to say. That's why the first time I ever wanted to express my feelings to someone, I put it into a letter. In order for me to convey my feelings to Akatsuki-san and for her to convey her feelings to me, we needed to use our actions instead of our words.

"Akatsuki-san..." I used all the courage inside of me to confess to her. "I've actually never really sung in front of anyone by myself before."

"Really? Oh, that tracks, actually. I guess you usually sing with everyone or duet with me."

"Yeah..." I said, entering a song into the tablet.

I grabbed a microphone, much to the happiness of Akatsuki-san, who began clapping. When we were in middle school and had to do

choir, I had put a lot of effort into making sure that I didn't stand out. I didn't care about being good, I just didn't want to be heard. It wasn't because I didn't want to be heard messing up, though. It had nothing to do with how good or bad I was as a singer. I just didn't want to stand out in any way.

The last thing I wanted was for people to kick me out of their group. But I didn't want to be revered by them either. I just wanted to blend in. That was my comfort zone. If possible, I didn't want anyone to hear my weird, unpolished, uncool voice.

I couldn't count all the times that I'd just blended in. Whatever I did never made an impression, and it hurt me. I'd get sad and lonely, and I'd want to scream at someone so they knew I existed.

I wanted to throw all my appearances away. I didn't want to be the uncouth plain girl, nor did I want to be the intelligent and beautiful honor student.

Even I had times when I just wanted to let loose. When that happened, who do you think I wanted next to me? Mizuto Irido? Isana Higashira? No, I didn't want either of them. The person I wanted to hear me scream was...

I bellowed into the microphone, filling the entire room with my emotions. I was angry. It was the same anger I'd had when I basically made *him* apologize to me for being jealous without even realizing that he was.

That's when I made my decision. I took off my glasses, untied my hair, and promised that I would never go through that again. But I didn't say those words. The lyrics I screamed had absolutely nothing to do with my feelings. Even so, I was able to put my heart on full display.

After I finished the song, I was gasping for air. My throat hurt a little. I wasn't one to speak in a loud voice, so doing it so suddenly like this was not a good idea. But I felt...refreshed.

"Yume-chan..." Akatsuki-san said in complete shock.

"Akatsuki-san, w-wait—" I weakly smiled at her before coughing up a storm.

"A-Are you okay?! Here! Drink water!"

I downed the cup of water that Akatsuki-san gave me. I exhaled and sat next to Akatsuki-san. Finally, I felt calm.

"Thank you."

"Y-Yeah, no prob, but are you okay? You seem kinda..." Akatsuki-san froze before she could finish her sentence.

"I sucked, right?" I giggled. "You don't have to pretend anymore. Just act like you normally do."

"Uh..."

I looked down at the microphone in my hands and glanced at

Akatsuki-san, who had an ambiguous look on her face. Of course I didn't sing well. I'd never really sung before. But if I'd kept quiet, Akatsuki-san would've said something to try and skirt around that. She'd try to keep up appearances. If there were other people here, there was no doubt that she'd liven things up. But right now, it was just the two of us.

"As your friend, I want to try and keep as few things from you as possible," I said. "Of course, everyone has a secret or two that they will absolutely never tell, and I definitely don't want you to tell me *everything* either."

"Yeah, makes sense."

"But," I continued, looking straight into Akatsuki-san's eyes, "I've never heard *you* sing by yourself."

Whenever we'd done karaoke, she'd always sung with other people. She was a mood-maker, and because she was always trying to liven things up, it may have been hard for other people to notice that. But she couldn't fool me. Not when we were the same.

Akatsuki-san was frozen, so I continued. "I won't ask why. I won't explain myself either, but—" I knew I needed to tell her exactly what she was to me. "You're the only one that's ever heard me sing. Not Higashira-san, and not *him*." I held the microphone out to her.

It was obvious what I wanted her to do. If I wanted her to expose herself to me, I needed to expose myself first. This was the first thing I'd learned from the biggest success and failure of my life.

Akatsuki-san silently looked down at the microphone for a bit before a soft smile spread across her face, as if the ice had melted. "No fair. You're pretty much strong-arming me into this."

"Sorry."

"It's fine because it's you, Yume-chan," she said cheerfully, taking the microphone from me, standing up, and turning to face me. "You said I didn't need to tell you the reason I don't sing in front of other people, but I'm gonna tell you anyway." Akatsuki-san's voice echoed across the room as a smile spread across her face. "It's because I don't want to embarrass other people with how good I am. Take notes, Yume-chan!"

Akatsuki-san's clean, serene voice filled the room. I was at a loss for words at how beautiful it was.



"Ha! Ha ha ha! That's horrible, Yume-chan! You *stole* his boxers?! You're a total pervert! Ha ha ha!"

"I-I didn't steal them! I picked them up! I'd never seen a boy's underwear before. You haven't either, have you?!"

"Me? I have *that* guy, remember? I've known him forever. I've

seen his underwear. We even do laundry at each other's places sometimes."

"Huh? By *that* guy,' you mean Kawanami-kun?! I-I had no clue you two were like that."

"No, we're not! We only used to take baths together when we were little! Only up to middle school!"

"Up to middle school?! Shouldn't that have stopped at elementary school?! D-Did anything happen? Are you okay?"

"Hm? Well, yeah, I'm all good, but in another sense I'm not?"

"That's so deep."

Akatsuki-san shot me a teasing grin. *So this is how normal childhood friends act? Hm, good to know.*

Now that we were tired from singing, we'd extended the time and were just chatting. At first, we talked about the stupid things that'd happened with the guys closest to us, but inevitably, the topic shifted to a racier tone. I'd intended to take the secret about his underwear to the grave, but I ended up telling her. *I need to silence her somehow...*

"Your room's right next to Irido-kun's, right? Do you ever hear any weird noises from him?"

"Weird noises?"

"Hm, let me rephrase that in a more roundabout way. Have you heard any porn sounds from his room?"

"What about that was 'roundabout'?"

"Ha ha ha! Well, back in middle school, there was a time that I snuck into *that* guy's house." Akatsuki-san entered into a heart-racing recounting of her past, and before I knew it, our time had run out, so we left. When we stepped outside, the sun had already set.

"Wow, it's totally nighttime. Are your folks gonna be worried?"

"I think it'll be okay. I let my mom know already, but I need to be home for dinner, so I should get going."

"Ah..." Akatsuki-san sighed and looked at the night-filled town.

I had no clue what she was actually looking at, though. Was she thinking about the memories we made today? Before I could decipher her expression, my phone rang. Looking at the screen, I saw it was from Mizuto. Usually, I ignored his calls, but since I was out kind of late, I decided it'd be best if I answered.

"Hello?"

"Where are you?"

I froze a little after hearing his familiar voice. "I was at karaoke with Akatsuki-san. I'm about to come home."

"Oh."

You were the one who asked me. Why do you sound so uninterested?! But after that heart-to-heart session I'd had, I wasn't too frustrated. Instead, I just gently smiled.

“What, were you worried?”

“...No.”

“Or did you think I was out on a date with someone?”

“...” At first, I thought that I’d gotten him, but I was proven wrong by what he said next. “If you were, I’d be worried about your date, not you.”

“Huh?”

“Worried whether you were being a burden to them or not.”

This guy was just as snarky as usual. Usually, this would end with me getting mad, but I glanced at Akatsuki-san.

“You don’t have to be worried about that,” I said.

“Hm?”

“I’ve found someone I can be a little bit of a burden on.”

Hearing that, Akatsuki-san clapped her hands happily, her eyes sparkling. She jumped onto me and then yelled into the phone, “That’s how it is. Sorry, Irido-kun!”

As if on cue, I ended the call. Akatsuki-san and I exchanged a look. We were silent for a few seconds before we burst out laughing. At what, I couldn’t exactly tell you, but we continued laughing as we walked home through the night crowd—just the two of us.

Getting stopped by the police was a real possibility since we were out past curfew in our uniforms. That definitely wouldn’t be great, but I was sure Akatsuki-san would handle it.

“It’s summer break. What do you want to do?” I asked.

“Hm. At the very least, I don’t want to go anywhere people’ll hit on you!”

The Ex-Childhood Friends Want to Watch Over

“Aaaaaaaaagh!!!”

There’s a certain undeniable fact that makes my hair stand on end whenever I recall it. I had a so-called girlfriend during the first semester of middle school.

She was devoted in a housewife sort of way, and while she may have been a shrimp, she was plenty beautiful to me. Out of a hundred people, I was sure that at least seventy of them would be jealous that she was with me. I sure did have a girlfriend like that at one point.

So why am I bragging about my romantic life? Well, I’m not. Just listen to my story till the very end, and I’m sure you won’t think I’m bragging in the slightest. In fact, let me throw out a prediction: your opinion’s gonna turn on its head. My past self’s gonna turn in his grave if it doesn’t.

“Ko-kun? Did you eat the pudding I left in the fridge?”

This daily scene used to be so normal. Even before we started dating—before our lifestyles changed—she’d talk to me like that whenever I was chilling at home.

Apparently, she’d left her pudding in my refrigerator. Furthermore, I vaguely recalled scarfing down said pudding. Keep in mind that this took place when I was still an innocent young buck.

I jumped up to apologize. “Sorry! I’ll buy you a new one!”

“It’s okay. I have another one.”

Oh yeah, I guess there was one more in there.

“Oh, so you bought one for each of us?”

“Yep.” She sat down at the dining table, violently tore off the lid, and began to gobble up the pudding, not once making eye contact with me.

Her cheeks puffed out as if she was pouting, but more than likely it was just because of the pudding.

“So... What’re you pissed about?”

“Nothing.” Her tone was curt; she was obviously angry.

No matter how obvious her poor mood was, I had no clue as to the reason, so I dropped the subject.

Later in the day when we sat down for dinner, she swiped a piece

of fried chicken from my plate.

“Yoink!”

“Wh-What the hell?!”

“What’re you pissed about? Are you *that* much of a glutton? You wanted to eat it *that* badly?” She shot me a smirk while waving it in front of me with her chopsticks.

Then, a light bulb went off in my head. Was this possibly revenge for the pudding?

“It’s normal to get pissed when someone steals something from you,” I said, a little frustrated as I avoided her gaze.

“All right, then I’ll give it back to you.” She brought her chopsticks towards my mouth. “Say ‘ah.’”

That was when I finally realized the truth behind it all. “So, that pudding...”

“Hm?”

“Did you buy it so you could do this?”

It would explain why she was so mad that I’d eaten it before she’d come over.

“Aha ha, who knows?” Akatsuki—the girl in front of me—laughed as she responded in a mocking tone.

Ugh, just thinking about it gave me goosebumps, made a chill run up my spine, and caused all the hair on my body to stand on end. That had probably been the start of it all. We were still a happy teasing couple, but at a certain point, her feeding me had become a given. Suddenly, it was rare for me to pick up chopsticks on my own, and soon enough, I no longer had any opportunity to use them. Basically, the guy known as Kogure Kawanami died once. Despite that, somehow, this memory survived.



I gasped for air as I awoke, a nasty sweat spreading across my body. *That dream again?* The morning rays of light flowed in from the gaps between my curtains. I’d hoped that basking in the purity of the sun would be enough to cleanse me of the nightmare, but it was as hard to get out as a curry stain.

I pulled the sleeve of my sweatshirt up and saw a bunch of hives on my arm, like a rock with a crap ton of barnacles. It was an appropriate sight after being woken up by a nightmare.

I headed to the dining room in low spirits and saw that there was a plate with a fried egg on it covered in plastic wrap as well as a reused note: “I will be home late. Eat whatever you want for dinner. Mom.”

I’d gotten used to these kinds of mornings. Thanks to the nightmare, I was firmly awake. I threw a piece of bread in the toaster

and went back to my room to change into my uniform. I ate the bread and the cold egg, downed some milk, and then got myself ready in the bathroom.

I grabbed my bag and headed out at 8:40. Just as I left, my neighbor's door opened, and out came a girl. She was a little less than 150 centimeters tall and wore a uniform from the same high school as mine. She shot me a side-glance upon noticing my presence.

Not to be outdone, I returned her glare, and we stared at each other in silence, not even waving. The looks we gave each other made our relationship status clear: enemies.

After a bit, she looked away, her ponytail swinging with her head. I followed suit and broke eye contact with her.

We walked side by side through the plain halls until we reached the elevators. *Ding!* One of the two elevators opened its doors, as if to greet us. I entered, but the shrimp didn't.

Instead, she waited a few seconds for the other elevator and got in that one instead. After my elevator's doors closed, I finally felt like I could relax. It was as if I'd received my own private room. I looked up at the blinding white lights fixed on the low ceiling and let out a heavy sigh.

Hear me, ye boys who yearn for a rom-com situation: never *ever* date the girl next door.

In my case, the girl next door, Akatsuki Minami, was like my sibling. We both had absent parents; family circumstances like ours weren't necessarily rare by Japan's standards. They were out the door first thing in the morning and back home late at night. Because of that, we had to learn to be self-sufficient from a young age in order to properly house-sit.

And since our lives were so similar, it was hard for us to not grow close. When our parents weren't around, we'd secretly go to each other's places to play and talk, do laundry, cook, clean, or even just chill. This lifestyle of ours continued uninterrupted over the years.

Then, middle school came, and with it, hormones. It was *really* hard for us to not start developing feelings for each other. So, in our third year, we changed our relationship from childhood friends to boyfriend and girlfriend.

It had been fun at first. She was my first girlfriend—the same childhood friend that I'd been with forever and had been crushing on. Our default setting was to be as close to each other as possible, and we were pretty much flirting day in and day out. Whenever we were home, we'd be stuck to each other. If I had to use the bathroom, I'd say something like "Is it okay if I leave you for a little?" and then she'd say "Nooo, I'll come with you!" We were chock-full of these

barf-worthy lines.

But that kind of relationship can only last for so long. Being attached at the hip was fun for...maybe the first month or so?

Rationally thinking, not even being able to go to the bathroom by yourself is incredibly annoying, isn't it? After enough time had passed, I came to the conclusion that we should try to give each other more space and draw a line for the sake of privacy. After all, wasn't it better for people in a relationship to have boundaries?

However, the word "boundaries" did not exist in Akatsuki Minami's vocabulary. One month, two months, half a year later—it didn't matter! She clung to me every possible second. If I wanted to go for a walk, she'd cling to my arm. When we came back, she'd sit on my lap.

On top of that, she started to do *all* the cleaning by herself and prepared *all* my meals to the point that every last calorie I consumed had been carefully planned by her. She decided what I'd wear, how long my hair could get—she went as far as washing not just my back, but my entire body, front included!

My day started with a "good morning" from her and ended with a "good night." *Does this sound like the perfect relationship? Hell. No.* I was her goddamn pet! In her eyes, I may have been her boyfriend, but I'd also stopped being human.

As a result of everything, I got sick and was admitted to the hospital for a stress ulcer. When she came to visit me, I ended up yelling at her with every fiber of my being, resulting in her breaking down in tears. With that, the two of us stopped being in a relationship and stopped being childhood friends. We became two people who happened to live next to each other.

Did you know that there's an exact term for this situation? "Living hell."

"Ah, Kawanami, mornin'!" A classmate, Nishimura, called out to me as I entered the classroom.

I was a pretty worldly guy and had a good number of acquaintances, mainly girls, here at Rakuro Private High School, but Nishimura here was the girl I spoke with the most.

"Yo, Nishimura. Wait... Did you change shampoos?"

"Ew! How'd you know?!"

"Cause I'm always smellin' you."

"Aha ha! Gross!" Nishimura laughed while slapping my shoulders.

I returned her smile with one of my own, and when I did, she tenderly pinched the ends of her hair.

"Actually, I may be a little happy to hear that," she said, shifting her eyes away from me.

Her lips trembled in embarrassment, her face fully flushed.

A chill ran up my spine. "S-Sorry. Bathroom."

"You should do that *before* you come to school!" She lightly laughed, making the chill I felt even colder.

Fortunately, I was able to hide my discomfort as I flew out of the classroom to the boy's bathroom. It was early in the morning, so nobody was around. I stood in front of the mirror and fearfully looked at my arm. Just as I expected, there were hives. *Shit.*

I turned the faucet on to wash my face and gargle a little. The water only provided a little peace of mind, but it was still very important. The cool sensation slowly helped to wash away both the chills and the hives.

My experience in middle school had left deep emotional scars, leading me to develop an allergy to romance that I was still afflicted with to this day. Similar to how soldiers coming home from war can be triggered by a loud noise, whenever I sensed any romantic feelings from a girl, I'd start feeling sick.

It was doubtful that I could ever fall in love again, but that didn't bother me. If anything, I felt grateful. Thanks to that experience and my condition, I'd reached the truth despite only being a high schooler: love is something not to experience, but to watch.

"Here."

At lunchtime, a new situation was beginning to unfold. My classmate and friend, Mizuto Irido, had apparently brought his stepsister, Yume Irido, a carton of black tea.

"This good enough?" he asked in a provoking voice.

"Why do you look so annoyed? Is there something you want to say?" Irido-san glared back at him.

"Fine. Don't want it? I'll drink it." Mizuto Irido extended his hand to retrieve the black tea, but before he could, Irido-san frantically grabbed it.

"Did I say I didn't want it? I was just pointing out that you forgot something."

"What? My sincerity? I'm showing you that, aren't I?"

"Show it with your words!"

"There's nothing wrong with what I said. You're the only one who's unhappy."

Irido rummaged around in his pocket and pulled out three coins and put them out on Irido-san's desk. There was a fifty-yen coin and two ten-yen coins, totaling seventy yen.

"Here. Interest."

"Huh?! Wai—" Irido-san exclaimed, but Irido ignored her, returned to his seat, and unwrapped his lunch.

He'd deployed his patented social interaction barrier. Not even Irido-san could penetrate it.

"Let's go!" She hastily stood up and whipped around, her long black hair flying through the air, and left the classroom with her friends.

"What happened?"

"Dunno..."

Her friends whispered in confusion as they followed her out.

The relationship between the Irido siblings had caused a little bit of a commotion in the beginning, and now they had an aura of being untouchable—especially Mizuto, who was a super loner. Adding the fact that they both had insanely good grades, it had gotten really hard to approach them, even if you wanted to. I was partially responsible for that atmosphere, though.

Those who didn't know them would struggle to understand their bickering. But I totally got it.

"You ever think about pickin' your words more carefully?" I asked, approaching Irido as he ate.

"What's this about?" he asked, sulking.

From the words he'd used with her—"Fine, I'll drink it" and "Interest"—I could guess that he'd most likely accidentally drunk Irido-san's tea. This wasn't exactly a unique situation, especially when you're living with someone. Also, the fact that he mentioned "interest" meant...

"Seventy yen, huh?"

"What do you want, Kawanami? You're being annoying."

I covered my mouth to hold back a laugh. His change was seventy yen. The black tea you can buy from the school store was a hundred thirty yen, so if you paid two hundred yen, your change would be seventy yen.

This twig boy had run to the school store just as lunch break began to buy black tea before it sold out in order to apologize to Irido-san.

The tea could be bought at any convenience store, but instead of buying it on the way to school, he'd gotten it here. That meant he'd been internally struggling over whether or not he should apologize. And then when it came to actually apologizing, he'd acted like a jerk. *Ha ha ha!*

I cheerfully ate the bread I'd bought while my chest filled with the happy feelings of my realization.

I'm a ROM expert: a person who lives to observe the budding romances of others. I haven't been in one for long, but I've observed a lot of different pairs, from real life friends to streamers. Out of all of them, these two—Mizuto and Yume Irido—were the ones who tugged

on my heartstrings the most.

I would die to protect these two. I'd spend all the money I made from my part-time job on them. It was *much* better spent on dressing up Irido so I could see Irido-san's reaction than anything else.

Food always tastes so much better after watching these two!

"Hm?" Irido closed his lunch box and stood up. Something must've caught his eye.

What's going on? Usually he's reading by now. I looked towards the door as Irido walked over there and my eyes widened. "What?!"

Gone were the happy feelings inside of me, and in their place was a pit of fury. Before I knew it, I was standing too.

Peeking into our classroom was a girl. There was no doubt about it. That pointlessly huge chest could only belong to one person—Isana Higashira!

She'd cozied up to Irido last month and has been an annoying obstacle ever since. What the hell was she doing here?! *You're supposed to meet up with Irido in the library after school, not during!*

I was firmly in the camp of Yume x Mizuto, which was maybe something I shouldn't have been so proud of, but Irido had made a habit of hanging out with Higashira after school. I wasn't able to mess with this, and if I tried, I knew I'd get chewed out by him. So I decided to let this after-school custom of theirs slide. After all, what was a little bit of time after school in the grand scheme of things? Whether it was in the classroom or at home, most of his time was spent with Irido-san. So why was Higashira here during *lunch*?!

"What's wrong, Higashira?" he asked in a much gentler voice than he'd used with Irido-san.

The tone he used with her wasn't one that you'd expect for a girlfriend or a friend, but for a little sister or a cousin. But maybe that was just wishful thinking.

"Huh, is that Irido's girlfriend?"

"Her boobs are huge!"

"He lives with Irido-san and has a girlfriend to boot?!"

"They make a nice couple."

"Big ass titties."

Shut up, outsiders! That is not his girlfriend! Fuck off with your assumptions!!!

Fortunately, the two of them didn't seem to hear the shit these people were spewing.

"Well, um, it has been conveyed to me that you are in low spirits," she said, glancing at his face while nervously rubbing her hands together.

"Me? Who'd you hear that from?"

"I've been told not to say."

“There’s only one person who’d say something like that out of the people you hang around.”

He’s got that right. I already had a mental image of *that* girl.

“I’m not down or anything.” He paused. “Hm, I just finished eating. Want to go to the library?”

“Certainly!”

Just like that the two of them headed for the library, all smiles. I walked out into the hallway and watched them disappear into the distance, astounded. *What just happened?* The black tea scene was more than enough. Who needed a useless scene like this?!

Chills ran up my spine, prompting me to turn around. Standing there was Akatsuki Minami with a proud smile on her face, as if she’d won.

“You... Why did you do that?!”

Akatsuki Minami had brought me to the back of the school, and I was cornering her small body against the wall. Normal girls would be intimidated, but Akatsuki just furrowed her brow and pinched her nose.

“Get away from me. Your breath stinks.”

“Huh?!”

“Ugh! It reeks!”

I didn’t slack on my oral care routine, so there was no way my breath stunk. Akatsuki pushed against my chest, but I wasn’t going anywhere.

“Did you change your plans? Weren’t you going to marry Irido and become Irido-san’s stepsister?”

“I haven’t completely given up on that, but don’t you think he and Higashira-san have a chance? He rejected her, yeah, but it finally got him to really be conscious of her for the first time. Plus, you already found out about them.”

“Screw you! Just because I found out about them doesn’t mean that you can openly use her to piss me off! Stop using people like they’re your pawns!” I shot her a cold gaze.

“That’s rich, coming from the guy who plays with people as if they’re dolls,” she said through a devilish smile. “You’re really gross, you know that? You smirk when watching other people. What’s so fun about other people’s romances?”

“Everything.”

“Romance is meant to be *experienced*, not observed.”

“Ironical that *you’re* the one saying that.”

“Whatever. Get off of me. I need to go help Higashira-san.”

“Why would I let you do that?”

“You leave me no choice.”

Just as I was about to ask her what she meant by that, she took off the hair tie that held up her ponytail and retied her hair into two low pigtails. Next, she pulled out a pair of glasses from her pocket and put them on. Her vibe was completely different now. It was like she'd transformed into a librarian.

I had a very bad feeling about this, and just as I was thinking that, her lips curled into a sneer.

"Sorry!" she yelled in a loud voice, bowing her head.

Why's she apologizing? But it didn't take me long to figure out what was going on. I began hearing the unsettling buzzing of people.

"R.I.P."

"Poor guy."

"Who's that? I've never seen her before."

I looked up and saw a few students poking their heads out and looking down at us. That's when I realized that she'd pulled me into her trap. Before I could say anything else, she quickly slipped away and ran. As she did, I saw a phone in her hand.

She was the one who'd gathered this crowd, all for this fait accompli! She wanted me to wear the stigma of being rejected! If I ran after her, it'd change to the stigma of a guy who forcefully chased after the girl who rejected him, spelling the end of my life as a high schooler.

It'd make it harder for me to create situations for those two siblings and impossible to preemptively stop that tramp who was trying to get in between the two of them!

I frantically racked my brain, trying to think of a way out of this. Was running away really my only option? I could feel my head overheating while it exceeded its processing power, but during that, a divine intervention descended upon me.

"Hey!" I called out to Akatsuki.

All eyes focused back on me, but at least I was successful at stopping her. *This is supposed to be my last resort, but...if I'm going down, I'm taking you with me, even if that means hurting myself even further!* I pulled out my phone and showed it to Akatsuki, my lips curling into a smile.

"I should delete this then, right?" I said, pushing the Play button.

"Morning, Ko-kuun!" A sickeningly sweet voice rang out. "It's time for schooooo! If you don't wake up, I'm gonna play a prank on youuu!"

"Aaaaaaaaagh!!!" Akatsuki screamed as if to drown out the sweeter-than-sugar voice coming out of my phone.

Now there was a new commotion because people were getting confused by our relationship. At first, it had been as simple as me confessing and being rejected, but with this voice recording that she'd

made for me when we'd dated in the mix, doubt was cast on that. Why would I have a homemade alarm recording from her if we weren't dating?

"Jeeez, Ko-kun, you're sooo spoiled! You want me to prank you *thaaat* muuuch? Aw, okay. Smoooooch!"

Our embarrassing past rang out across the school yard. Akatsuki's face was flushed with embarrassment. Now, the puzzled looks were focused on Akatsuki instead of me. The pipsqueak quickly walked towards me.

I smirked at her and she returned it with a death glare. She grabbed me by the wrist and dragged me away.

"No way, no way, no waaay!!! You haven't deleted that?!"

"Yeah, it's my insurance policy!"

"Kill yourself!!!"

I felt like I'd won after hearing her paltry insult. We were currently in a first year classroom in a different part of the school. Fortunately, the commotion hadn't reached over here, so we could be alone.

"You're not as many steps ahead of me as you think! I will gladly chip away at my very being if it means protecting that contentious relationship of theirs!"

"You're such a creep, you obsessive shipper."

"I prefer the term 'ROM expert.'"

"Also, what do you mean chipping away at *your* very being?! You're only chipping away at mine!"

"Not true." I thrust my arm in front of her, putting on full display the hives that had sprung out across it.

"That's..."

"It's from hearing your 'sweet' voice. I still feel like I'm about to hurl."

"Ew, you look sick."

"Geh." Something was about to come out.

"Ah!!! Stop! Swallow it!" Akatsuki covered my mouth with her small hands, but the cold sensation spread across my mouth and made me feel like barfing even more.

Fortunately, I was able to stop it before it reached my mouth.
Phew.

Akatsuki let out a long sigh as if she'd given up and moved next to me. "Fine. Jeez. Grab my shoulder. I'll take you to the nurse's office."

Suddenly I felt like I was about to barf again.

"Don't start gagging again! There's absolutely no romantic intent behind this!"

"Oh, okay. That's good."

“SMH, you’re supposed to be an energetic person, not a sickly one.”

“And whose fault do you think that is?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m so sorry.”

Using Akatsuki as a cane that was thirty centimeters shorter than I wasn’t too bad. I gripped her slender shoulder while she wrapped her arm around my waist and walked like that to the nurse’s office. My hives gave no sign of receding.

“So, hey,” I said.

“What? Don’t talk too much with your barf-mouth.”

“I’m gonna barf all over your head. Anyway, if Higashira and Irido get together, what are you gonna do?”

“What am I gonna do?”

“I know you’re crazy, but you’re not crazy enough to actually think Irido-san would marry you. How are you going to find your happiness with her free like that?”

Akatsuki-san let out a dry laugh and glanced at me. “What? You’re worried about me?”

“Not at all. You can die on the side of the road for all I care. But...” I was careful with my words in order to make sure I expressed my feelings accurately. I didn’t want her to misunderstand. “I don’t think you can really woo Irido, and that becomes even more impossible with Higashira all over him. I just got to thinking that what you’re doing is meaningless.”

I wasn’t worried about her, nor did I feel bad for her. But seeing her like this did leave a bad taste in my mouth. She may have been the instigator of our relationship, but I was the one who had ended things. Maybe I felt a bit responsible.

“You’re shit at talking,” she snapped. “Don’t try to bring up difficult topics.”

“Since when have I been shit at talking?!”

“You can flap your gums, but nothing of substance comes out. But I guess I’m the same.”

I fell silent. It felt empty thinking about it that way. I guess even she had her moments of brilliance.

“Hey...” she started again.

“Hm?”

“Your hives are gone.” She pointed to my arm.

I directed my eyes towards it, and as she said, the red bumps had disappeared. I hadn’t realized it, but I didn’t feel sick anymore either.

“Oh. I guess I ended up feeling better while we had that pointless conversation. You can let me off here.”

“You’re the one who started the conversation.”

“Either way, do as you will, failed heroine. Irido’s not gonna fall

for Higashira, and she doesn't plan on getting with him either."

"Who are you calling a loser?!"

Akatsuki tried to hit me, but I quickly let go of her and dodged. She puffed out her cheek, pouting and glaring at me. *You think you're cute by making that face? Well you're not! Not anymore!*

Suddenly, the small-framed girl closed in on me. "Ko-kun..."

It was the name she'd called me when we still considered each other childhood friends. This girl who was thirty or so centimeters shorter than I stood on her tippy toes and got as close as she could to my lips. Then, in a soft voice that was barely a whisper, Akatsuki said, "If I fail, will you make me happy?"

My heart skipped a beat. *What does she mean by—* But before I could fully process my confused thought, I felt a chill run across my entire body.

"Urp."

"Later." Akatsuki happily skipped away, leaving me to deal with the agony of having to keep myself from throwing up.

I held my hand against my mouth and didn't take my eyes off of her fading figure. Since I was her ex-childhood friend, I knew what expression she was wearing even though I couldn't see her. *She's mad.* Apparently, I'd incurred her wrath without even realizing it...not that it really mattered.



I skipped fifth period to rest in the nurse's office, but I made it back for sixth. As I entered the room, I immediately shot that shrimp a look, as if to say that there was a limit to the shit she could pull, but she completely ignored me.

When classes ended for the day, Irido immediately stood up with his bag. *Guess he's going to the library to meet with Isana Higashira.* As hard as it was for me to allow, I didn't want to risk Irido blowing up at me if I confronted him about it.

God, today's such a shitty day. Just as I exhaled, I noticed Irido whisper something to Irido-san as he passed her. I didn't hear what he said, but I did hear Irido-san's response.

"You could've just said that from the start."

I had begun to stand up, but as soon as I heard that, I sat right back down and fell onto my desk. The emotions surged through me, and it took everything I had to keep them in check. *You apologized even though she'd probably forgotten about it by now?! Good for you!!!*

"You're so gross."

And then I felt as if I'd been splashed with cold water. I looked up and saw Akatsuki Minami staring at me with an icy glare.

Buzz off! Don't interrupt me! You're not wanted here!

As much as I wanted to say that out loud, Akatsuki looked away and touched the end of her ponytail.

“Well...” she began, covering her mouth with her ponytail. “I do feel *kinda* bad that you had to skip fifth period. I guess I might’ve gone a little *too* far.” Her whisper was so low that I could barely hear her.



I was usually fast on my feet, but this left me completely speechless. Before I could say anything, she quickly shuffled away from me. All I could do was watch her leave.

Our relationship was not one that could be fixed. Even if one of us ate the other's pudding, we wouldn't get into a fight—we probably wouldn't even feel bad. That was just how we were now. We'd lost our flirty dynamic, but the Irido siblings still had that between them.

Ah, I see. I guess it wasn't meaningless, even if she wasn't happy in the end. It wasn't meaningless at all. Besides...

"I should be the one apologizing, you dolt."

We'd learned to reflect on our actions.

The Ex-Childhood Friend Is Lonely

“I don’t need you anymore.”

There’s a certain undeniable fact that makes my hair stand on end whenever I recall it: I had a so-called boyfriend for a period of time in middle school. He was my childhood friend for as long as I could remember—a person who might as well have been my sibling. It was a given that wherever I was, he’d be there too.

Have you ever gotten a crush on your older brother or longed for your little brother? I’m sure there are people like that somewhere in the world, but it’s more common for one’s first love to be a relative that they don’t see all that often. Essentially, people typically fall for someone they *don’t* see regularly. That’s why I never saw that guy as a romantic interest...not until a very particular incident, at least.

Apparently, there’s the term “latchkey children,” which describes a small fraction of kids who have to carry their house keys because neither of their parents come home until late at night.

When I was still in elementary school, I would always enter the apartment without saying anything. No reason to—nobody was around to hear me announcing my return. I didn’t say goodbye in the mornings for the same reason...nor did I have any friends to say anything to.

That being said, I was very codependent. If someone was nice to me, I’d stick to them like glue and wouldn’t let go no matter what. If they distanced themselves from me even a little bit, I’d start to grow worried and cling to them even more. (See: my clinginess with Yume-chan from earlier.)

Back then, I had no self-awareness or self-control, so people naturally distanced themselves from me. Nobody wanted to walk home with me, let alone be my friend.

When I’d come home, I’d put my backpack on the couch, and then look at the dining table to see the usual note telling me that dinner was in the freezer. When I opened it, I’d be greeted with a trove of frozen dinners to pick from. I never once thought that the way I lived was sad or lonely in the slightest. I was already used to it, so I believed it was normal.

However, sometimes when I was deciding what to eat, tears would well up in my eyes. There was nobody around to share a meal with. I’d plop down on the couch and use the tablet left on the coffee

table to watch internet videos, especially from this one channel. I'd laugh so much watching their new videos. This was how I'd spent most of my days.

Sometimes I'd hear voices from next door. A boy named Ko-kun lived next to me. He was a popular boy and had a lot of friends who'd come over after school. His parents were barely ever around, and he had fast internet and a lot of games—it was the perfect place to hang for guys their age.

It might seem like we didn't really spend time together, but that wasn't necessarily the case. Even back then, it wasn't too unusual for us to eat dinner together. The only thing was that he was a social guy who had something like a hundred friends, so our time together decreased more and more.

There wasn't much I could do about it. He seemed to have fun hanging out with his new friends, and I didn't want to be clingy and make him hate me like my friends did.

Would it have been fun if I had a bunch of friends over like he did? Ultimately, I'd concluded that since I was bad at reading the room, I might make things weird. With that in mind, it was easier to be by myself, so I continued watching videos on my favorite channel, where they'd play with cats. That way, I'd never have to worry about anyone having any weird ideas about me.

“Kawanami, are you goin' out with Minami?”

One day, this question suddenly came from the other side of the wall, making my heart jump out of my chest. We were at the age that these kinds of questions were normal. We were starting to grow up, so we knew what dating was, but only really thought of it as a guy and a girl spending time together.

Basically, Ko-kun and I spent so much time together that of course he'd be asked if we were dating. This was the first time I'd heard it, but it was entirely possible that he'd been asked a million times over.

I was very curious as to how he'd answer. I wasn't his girlfriend or anything, so it'd be problematic if he said we were, even as a joke. He was popular, and if the other girls heard I was dating him, they might start bullying me for not knowing my place.

Thinking back, I couldn't believe how shallow I was for only thinking about myself and my circumstances. It was rude when Ko-kun had been sincerely looking out for me.

“Huh? We're not like that. She's so much better than a girlfriend!”

I froze as I heard him say that. I couldn't think. My ears were filled with the sound of my rapidly pounding heart.

“Doesn't that mean that you like her?”

“No! Our relationship's not that stupid! It's way better than dating!”

His voice passed through my left ear and then went out my right. Before I knew it, a new video had already begun to autoplay. The tablet fell to the floor. I staggered to my room without picking it up, crashed on my bed, held my pillow against my chest, screamed into it, and flailed my legs wildly.

My face was as red as if I'd just come back from a run. The heat inside me spun around like a hurricane, and I had no idea how to calm myself down.

There was no way he wouldn't be teased. He *had* to think I was annoying. I had no problem with him lying to get them off his back, but even so, he'd told them that he actually *liked* being with me.

Sure, maybe he was just snapping back at them. Maybe he'd said it as a reflex. But still...that's a weird thing to say reflexively. What had he meant when he said I was "better than a girlfriend"?

But even if I didn't know what he meant or what his real intentions were, I was so happy that I didn't know what to do with myself. I thought I was going crazy.

That was probably the moment when something important inside me broke. If that was how he thought about me, he might never get a girlfriend, and it'd be all my fault. I felt bad for him, so I came up with a solution. If he wanted a girlfriend, then all I had to do was become his girlfriend.

With that, the seed of our hell was planted.



Summer vacation had begun, and I was currently rolling around on my bed while embracing my pillow.

"Ah, Yume-chaaan!"

I wasn't worried at all. Even if we were on break, I still could've met up with her, but I'd failed to take into account how serious of a person Yume-chan was. She'd been hell-bent on finishing her homework sooner rather than later, meaning that July was Yume-chanless.

I liked how diligent she was, but it left me in this situation where I was withering away due to Yume-chan deficiency. It was times like these that I hated Irido-kun from the bottom of my heart since he got to live with her. I tried reaching out to her over LINE, but no matter how long I waited, there was never any indication that she'd even read my messages.

When the afternoon rolled around, the doorbell rang. Specifically my doorbell, not just someone buzzing into the general apartment building. No one could get into my building without being buzzed in, so I figured it had to be a neighbor.

I *really* didn't want to answer the door, but since I was tasked with

watching the house, I couldn't just ignore people who came by, no matter how annoying it was to deal with them.

"Coming," I called out, jumping over the piles of clothes strewn across the living room to reach the front door.

I didn't even bother peeking through the hole to see who it was. I just opened it and saw my neighbor standing there—a neighbor I knew very well and very much did not want to see.

"Yo," he said, raising his hand to greet me.

Standing at the entrance of my apartment was a boy the same age as I who lived in the apartment next door—Kogure Kawanami.

I took one look at him and then moved to wordlessly shut the door.

"Ah, hold on a second, miss," he said, sticking his foot out like a pushy salesman.

I looked at his stupid all-smiles face with dead eyes.

"What do you want? Are you trying to force your way into a girl's apartment? I'm gonna call the police."

"I'm not here because I want to be. Your mom told me to look after you since she won't be home for a while. You always slack on cleaning and stuff during long breaks even though you're good at it."

"I'm not slacking..."

"Have you looked in a mirror? Your hair's a mess, your shirt's inside out, and you're not even wearing a bra... Oh, wait, I guess you don't really need to."

"Help! I need hel—"

"Shut up! You're gonna bother the neighbors! Either way, they already know you're lying!"

"Mmff, mmff!"

Kawanami covered my mouth with his hand and pushed his way inside. *You're totally acting like a burglar!* At the very least, I decided to kick him in the crotch, but my leg was met with a hard object.

"So sorry, but I came prepared."

"Grrr."

I couldn't believe that I wasn't able to use the same strategy again. *This crafty bastard...* But soon enough, I realized it was more annoying to try and keep him out, so I just walked back to the living room.

"You're here to check on things, right? Whatever. Go ahead."

"Thanks, I will. Geh—" As soon as he entered the living room, he let out a noise as if he'd found a cat's corpse. "God... You could at least throw away the empty cup noodles."

"Shut it." I kicked the boxes of snacks in my path away and lay down on the couch.

He was so full of himself even though *I* was the one who used to take care of him. *But if he's so gung ho about taking care of me, then I*

might as well take advantage of that and leave the cleaning to him.

Kawanami picked up a trash bag and began tossing all the garbage on the floor into it. *Of course this guy knows where the trash bags are without me telling him.* Either way, I refused to get up, so I swiped through my phone while idly moving my legs up and down.

After some time, Kawanami shot me a frustrated look. "Can you be a little more conscious of what you're letting people see?"

My outfit today was an oversized shirt. Just that. I wasn't wearing anything under it except my panties. It was more than enough for home-wear. Simple and comfortable. I couldn't care less about how I looked in front of him.

In contrast, it seemed that Kogure-kun from the Kawanami family next door could not get his eyes off my thighs that were just barely covered by the hem of my shirt. *Oh?*

"I'm so sorry if my beautiful legs are turning you on. You can go home if you want to *relieve* yourself."

"Not a bad idea. I'm in the mood for a pair of big tits, and I'm definitely not gettin' that here."

"I'm gonna kill you!" I threw a cushion at him, but he easily caught it and threw it back on the couch.

He grimaced as he picked up some of my clothes. "Ew, you're really leaving your panties out here?"

"Don't steal them. I'm running low."

"Cause you got fat?"

"Because I haven't done laundry!"

"That's not much better."

I'd gotten bored of doing whatever on my phone, so I turned over on the couch and faced Kawanami. "Listen, you..."

"What?"

"How can you neglect yourself so much, yet be so nosy when it comes to other people?"

"You're not one to talk. Your place is the living incarnation of neglecting yourself."

"You're nosy when it comes to Irido-kun."

"And you're nosy when it comes to Higashira. I heard all about the tips you tried to give her."

"Having been raised in the same environment, I guess we have the same personality too."

"You talking about *us*?" Kawanami laughed through his nose. "If you're trying to piss me off, you're doin' a great job."

It's true that the two of us are nothing alike. Though we may have been raised like siblings, at our core, we were two different people. He was a social butterfly, and I was a social caterpillar.

"God, you piss me off."

“Quit your bitching. I’m gonna clean up the minimum amount and then leave. I have plans.”

“Plans’?! Did you get a girlfriend or something?”

“Are you trying to start a fight?”

I laughed, knowing he physically couldn’t have a girlfriend due to his condition. *So what are you trying to hide from me?*

“I have a friend coming over. They won’t be loud or anything, so don’t worry.”

“Oh, so they’re the quiet type?”

“Yeah, you know them pretty well,” Kawanami’s lips bent into a smirk. “It’s Mizuto-kun from the Irido family.”

I’d asked to join him, but he wouldn’t let me, because he’s lame. I wanted to see how he’d react if I tried flirting with Irido-kun, but I could totally see Irido-kun pushing me away without being flustered in the slightest. The thought of him not reacting to me kinda made me want to cry. *Not seriously though.*

I’d rather Irido-kun get with Higashira-san, because that’d leave Yume-chan open, and I could finally be with her! *Oh, I want to sleep in the same bed as Yume-chan...*

While I was lost in my thoughts, I heard voices from outside. It seemed that Irido-kun had arrived. The voices moved past my door and to Kawanami’s place, but I couldn’t make out what they were saying. *The soundproofing’s better than it used to be.*

Irido-kun rarely came to Kawanami’s place, which made me curious about his motives, especially since Kawanami was so tight-lipped. If I were Irido-kun, I wouldn’t have taken one step out of the house that Yume-chan was in *just* to go to Kawanami’s place. He had to have had some kind of agenda.

I pushed my ear to the wall, but I could barely make out the muffled sound of voices. So close and yet so far, I grew even more desperate.

“Where is it...” I began rummaging through my closet where I kept all the things that I didn’t use anymore. “Oh, here it is!”

From the bottom of my stash of junk, I pulled out a box-shaped machine with headphones and a stethoscope-shaped microphone—a wall-contact microphone. It could pick up vibrations through the wall and precisely catch the sounds from the other side. I’d bought this in middle school after saving up my allowance.

I proudly brought it back to the living room wall, set it up, and turned it on. As soon as I confirmed that it was working right, I put on the headphones and pressed the microphone against the wall.

“You’re kidding me. You’re living the dream of every high school boy ever.”

“The grass is always greener. Your circumstances sound good to me. I’m jealous of how easy you can take it.”

I could clearly hear Kawanami and Irido-kun—in that order—talking. But I had no idea what they were talking about.

“I see what you mean. Jealousy brews without knowing the full picture of things. I’d swap with you any day of the week, though.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I’d ever do that.”

“...”

“Stop grinning at me. You’re creeping me out. I didn’t mean it like that. I don’t want anyone else to have the pain of living in the same house as *that* girl. That’s it.”

“Uh-huh, I know, I know.”

“You *definitely* don’t believe me.”

Hmm. Did Irido-kun come over 'cause he wanted to get away from his house? It was possible, I guessed, that now that summer vacation was in full force, he had no choice but to constantly see Yume-chan, so maybe he’d gotten fed up and left? How nice! If you hate that life so much, switch with me!

If he heard me say that, he’d totally grimace. *I know you would! You’re such an annoying guy!*

“All right, how about you fork over the fee for me letting you chill here?” Kawanami said in a loud and clear voice.

“I don’t like the way you said that, but you’re right. It’s part of our deal.”

“It’s summer break. I bet you have a lot of fun tales for me.”

“Nope. Stop being gross. We’ve already been living together for four months. The kinds of risqué events that you’re hoping for don’t happen anymore.”

“I don’t need them to be risqué. I’m just looking for a peek into your daily life. For example...what do you two do for lunch? At school, you both have a lunch box.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, that idiot tried to make lunch by herself the other day.”

Yume-chan’s handmade lunch?!

“Her finger almost became an ingredient in the fried rice she was trying to cook. In the end, I had to chop up the vegetables for her.”

Wait... Then doesn’t that mean...

“So, Irido... What you’re saying is that the two of you were standing next to each other in the kitchen?”

“Yeah? How else would we prepare food?”

Before I knew it, I was digging my nails into the wall. The scraping sound flew back into the microphone, inflicting damage on myself.

“So...how’d it taste?”

“What do you think? Obviously, bad. It was so burnt, it was like eating ash.”

You goddamn lucky bastard!!! If you hated it that much, then I could've—

“But it was a lot better than the last time she tried making it.” His voice was curt, but tinged with bitterness. That was enough to make it clear that it actually tasted good!

“Irido, lemme ask you somethin’...”

“What?”

“Did you tell her that it was a lot better than before?”

“Huh? Hell no. Can you imagine what she’d do if she got a big head?”

“Tell her!” Kawanami and I hissed at the same time.

I couldn’t hold back anymore. It was to my benefit that Irido-kun lost points with Yume-chan, but I felt bad for her!

“Hm? Did you hear someone?”

“Oh, that was probably just the sound of a video or something. Anyway, what else you got for me?”

“Hm... I guess her AC unit’s been broken since the start of July, so while waiting for it to get fixed, she’s been spending most of her time in the living room with me. Sometimes when I look up, she’s fast asleep.”

I began grinding my teeth upon hearing him nonchalantly talk about all this time he had with Yume-chan. *Oh to be in his shoes!* I would’ve had the happiest month of my life! I felt like I was about to start crying tears of blood with how Yume-chan deficient I was, but I couldn’t let myself slip up and lose this chance to hear more about her home life. It was hard to concentrate though with my jealousy, beating heart, and all these emotions coming and going.

“All right, let’s keep this going! What’s next?”

“I’m tired. Don’t make me do all the talking. You should do some for a change, Kawanami.”

“Hm?”

“Minami-san’s next door isn’t she? You’ve gotta have some kind of story you can share. I don’t really care about the contents, but it’d help me try and figure out what goes on in her head.”

Wait, is he trying to get Kawanami to tell him a story similar to the one he told about Yume-chan? I suddenly sobered up from the possibility of my past being talked about.

“For Irido-san’s sake? Wow, you’re such an overprotective older brother.”

“You’re not changing the subject.”

“Fine...”

N-No, don’t! Just refuse! Do you know what’ll happen if you tell him

anything?!

"I can tell you a story, but let me just warn you that it won't be anything cute like with you and Irido-san. She's crazy. She might've even broken a few laws."

"Yeah, I know. That's why I'm asking. But if you don't want to share, then I'm out of stories. I'm pretty sure I already shared enough to pay my fee."

"God, you don't do anything for free, do you?"

I thought about banging against the wall, but that'd alert them to my eavesdropping. *That* would become a story he'd tell someday. But how much longer could I pretend like I didn't know what was going on?

"Okay, so this was back in elementary school," Kawanami began recounting. "We both got a smartphone at about the same time."

"In elementary school? That's kinda early."

"Yeah, our parents were never really home, so they wanted to make sure that they had a way to reach us. Anyway, we exchanged numbers and LINE IDs."

"Uh-huh."

"And from then on, my phone was going off all the time."

"Sounds about right. I get a lot of messages too—not that I read any of them."

Oh yeah, I remember that. I was so happy about getting my first smartphone. I didn't call him all the time because I wanted to talk to him; I just got addicted to the sound of his voice. It was the same feeling that people have when they get a new toy.

"It was fun using my new phone, so I went along with it at first. Eventually it got annoying, so I told her to chill out a bit. That solved my problem of being called all the time, but this is where the story begins."

"That already sounded bad. It gets worse?"

"Yeah, it does. So you know how we'd usually eat dinner by ourselves 'cause our parents would get home late? I called her 'cause I thought we could eat together, but can you guess what happened?"

Wait. You're telling him that story?!

"Hm? What? She didn't pick up?"

"Well yeah, she didn't pick up, but that's because her phone was under my pillow."

"Wait...what?"

I could feel myself cringing at Irido's confused reaction.

"I heard something vibrating underneath my pillow only to find her phone there. I still don't know when she left it there."

"Couldn't she have just left it there by accident and forgotten about it?"

“That’s what I thought, so I took it and brought it to her. Ah, I was so young back then. So naive. Never in my wildest dreams did I think that my childhood friend was secretly recording me.”

“...”

Okay. I can explain. Please, let me explain! I’d done that on a whim. As soon as I’d had the idea, I thought I had no choice *but* to do it! If I could acquire a recording of his voice, I wouldn’t have to call him anymore and we could stay on good terms.

Agh! I haven’t grown up since then! Even when I snuck into Yume-chan’s house, my train of thought was exactly the same as back then!

“I didn’t realize what she was doing at the time. It wasn’t until something similar happened in middle school that it finally dawned on me. Ever since then, I’ve gotten machines that can detect the waves from hidden microphones and stuff. I still regularly use them to check the apartment.”

“How do I put this...?” Irido-kun went silent for a moment, probably trying to pick the right words. The fact that he did this made it hurt all the more. “I’m surprised you’ve managed to stay sane with all that crazy next door.”

“I’ve already experienced hell. Compared to that, this is nothing.”

“Is today safe?”

“Of course! It’s been fine ever since we started high school. Although, I guess there are some things that I wouldn’t be able to detect. For example...” Kawanami intentionally dramatically paused before continuing. “A wall-contact microphone.”

My heart jumped. *Does he know? Did he say all that because he knows I’m listening?* Now that I thought about it, he *had* let it slip that Irido-kun was coming over. Was this all to tease me?! *I-I can’t believe this! Why was this so planned out?! Does he hate me that much?! Okay, maybe he does hate me. I know that he does, but he should just ignore me. Why would he go out of his way to bother me?* Either way, now that I knew he’d set me up, there was no need for me to go along any further with his little game.

But just as I was about to take the microphone off of the wall, he started talking again.

“But...” The microphone picked up his soft tone of voice. “I don’t think you need to worry about her all that much. She’s just a little bit lonelier than other people. That’s it.”

“A little”? Definitely doesn’t sound like that from what I heard.”

“She’s gotten a lot better. Even when she snuck into your house, I’m pretty sure she felt bad about it. As long as she doesn’t go out of control, it’s all good.”

“What happens if she does?”

“If she does...” Kawanami chuckled. “I’ll be there to stop her.”

I took the microphone off of the wall. That didn't sound like something he intentionally wanted me to hear. Maybe he thought that as soon as I heard him talk about the wall-contact microphone, I would've stopped listening.

His words repeated in my head. "I'll be there to stop her."

Sure, I was prone to loneliness. I'm a weak person who's prone to loneliness, someone who'll freeze up if she's not in contact with the warmth of another person. But even so...

"I don't need you anymore."



"Yo, I'm here. Why'd you call me over so early?"

The next morning, I'd called Kawanami over for a certain reason.

"Help me clean."

"Again? You didn't do *any* cleaning by yourself? Let me guess, your mom got mad, and—" As soon as Kawanami entered the living room, he furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. "What the hell? It's clean. What exactly am I supposed to clean?"

All the dishes, trash, and scattered clothes had been cleaned up by me. I hadn't taken care of them earlier because I didn't feel like it, but it wasn't hard to do it with the right mindset. But regardless, I didn't want him to help clean up a room.

"I want you to help with this." I brought out a microphone shaped like a stethoscope, headphones, and the boxlike machine that they were connected to. "Could you throw this out?"

I said it so naturally that Kawanami silently shifted his gaze to the microphone.

"Sure. Of course I don't mind you getting rid of this, but...are you sure?"

"Of course. I can't listen to Yume-chan's voice with this."

"Wait, you know what? *You* should throw it out. I don't know how to dispose of it properly."

"I'm kind of a hoarder. If you make me deal with it, I might come up with an excuse to keep it." Both the things I needed to throw out and the things I should have thrown out were still in my possession. "I'll look it up for you, so...please?"

All I could do now was be honest and ask for his help. I stared at him for a little bit before he exhaled and scratched his head. "Fine, but on one condition."

"Huh?"

"You're taking care of dinner tonight. I'm getting sick of eating at family restaurants." Kawanami picked up the wall-contact microphone.

As I looked up at his face, I let out a mocking laugh. "And you

said *I* was lonely.”

“Huh?” Kawanami turned around. “Huh?!” It took him a little too long to realize. “You were liste—”

Then he dropped the microphone on the ground. I turned my back to him. *With all that annoying stuff out of the way, it's time to call Yume-chan!*

“Heya! Yume-chan? You done with your homework?”

“Hey, listen to me! Did you hear our conversation?!”

Give it a rest. Seeing you get red like that does nothing for me anymore.

Childhood Friends No More

Part 1 of 2

This story takes place before either of us had any idea what romantic feelings were. Our families, who were close, were on our first and last trip together. If I remember right, we went somewhere pretty far away to do some sightseeing, but I don't remember much more than that, probably because this was still back when we were in our early years of elementary school.

During the day, the two of us would play together, run around, and beg our parents to buy us whatever we wanted. Honestly, it was entirely possible that the trip was a sort of apology from them. They couldn't spend all that much time with us, so instead they spent money on us.

When night came, we went to the Japanese inn that they'd reserved—my first hotel ever. Our parents conked out from exhaustion right away. I, however, couldn't do the same, as I struggled to settle into this new environment and this different bed. And so, I got really, really bored.

While tossing and turning, I felt something warm enter the sheets.

"Wha—"

"Shhh!"

A head popped out from under the sheets, a wide smile on her face and an index finger to her lips—A-chan.

"Shhh, Ko-kun!" she said like one of our teachers before giggling.

My eyes were glued to her face. "What're you doin'?" I asked.

"Nothin'. I'm sooo bored."

"Oh, same. Can't sleep at all."

"Me neither."

It's not like we could turn on the lights and play since our parents were fast asleep. So our options were extremely limited. That's when I came up with an incredibly simple idea.

"Wanna go outside?"

"Huh? Outside? W-We can't."

"We'll be back in a jiffy. No one'll notice."

Of course, I was an incredibly naive child. A-chan wasn't as much of a rule breaker as I was, but back then, I often took charge, so I pushed her to follow my lead.

We changed out of our yukata into our normal clothes and left, doing our best not to make a sound. The receptionists were still in the lobby, so we slipped past them, hugging the front desk's counter, and then made a break for outside.

"Wow!" I voiced my honest reaction to seeing an entirely new

world.

Up until now, I'd only ever seen the world at night from my apartment's window. But seeing the flashing lights made my heart race. Like entering a new area in a video game, I wanted to explore everywhere. It really made me realize that the world was still spinning, even when I was asleep.

I wanted to know about the nightlife. What kind of people were out there? Why couldn't I see this world up close until now? I was overwhelmed by the new scenery that stretched out in front of me in all directions.

I felt my hand being squeezed as I tried running off. I turned around and saw A-chan, her shoulders shrunk in uncertainty.

"Scared?" I asked.

She didn't respond.

"Wanna go back?"

If she'd said yes, I would've turned around immediately. I may have been a little shit, but I never would have made A-chan do anything she didn't want. But she shook her head. "I'm okay... You're here, Ko-kun," she said with a brave smile.

Seeing her like that made my chest feel weird, but I was still too young to know what that feeling was. But either way, thus began our nighttime adventure into the world. We couldn't go into any stores, of course, so we kept our adventure to taking in the scenery as we walked around. It might not have been much, but to us, it was loads of fun.

An old guy from a shop gave us some snacks and told us to "hurry on home" after we ate them. We weaved through the crowds of drunk adults stumbling through the streets. We stopped to listen to street musicians. It really felt like we were adventurers exploring an unknown dungeon.

When we got tired from walking, we used the change we had on hand to buy drinks at a vending machine, then sat on the edge of a flower bed while staring at the sky.

"The moon's so pretty."

"Yeah."

I don't remember if the moon was full or crescent, but I do remember thinking about how beautiful it was for the first time in my life.

So, here's the punch line.

After that, we were promptly detained by the police, and then thoroughly yelled at by our parents. Now that I think about it, it's a miracle that nothing bad happened to us. I was able to keep this nice memory, which ended with the following conversation between the two of us—a reckless, thoughtless promise that is still carved into my

heart to this day.

“Can I be with you forever, Ko-kun?”

“Yeah, of course!”

And as you know, I broke this promise.



About one week had passed since summer vacation started, meaning that we were nearing the end of July and in the midst of our long break. However, our school had a certain event—a three-day, two-night study camp.

To be clear, this wasn't a field trip or an outdoor ed kinda situation. The school booked a hotel for us to be stuck in to attend lectures. According to my upperclassmen friends, the only thing we could look forward to was the fact that the hotel was pretty fancy, and the food they served was tasty.

That we had to study during break was ridiculous in the first place. *Stupid prep school*. But this wasn't the time to be up in arms. My energy was better spent thinking about the positives. This was a special event that included overnight stays. I could use this to my advantage.

“Yo. You look dead, Irido.”

“Yeah...” he responded in a low grumble.

Mizuto Irido and I had met up in front of the school.

“My sleep schedule's been thrown off by summer break...”

“I know you aren't a morning person. Surprised you were able to even get up.”

“I didn't wake up. I was smacked awake.”

“By your mom?”

“No...” He turned his sleepy eyes towards a group of girls not too far away from us where a certain girl with lustrous, long black hair that shone in the morning sun stood. A girl the complete opposite of Irido, completely awake and sharp despite the early hour—Yume Irido.

“Wait...” I quickly looked around before whispering to Irido.

“Does Irido-san wake you up every day?”

“Not every day,” he said, partially denying my question with an annoyed look on his face.

So you're saying she wakes you up sometimes?! Really?! I covered my mouth with my hand, trying to contain my laughter from this hilarious situation I'd unexpectedly come across first thing in the morning. You guys are basically married!

“Attention, students. Please board the bus by class number.”

I was able to somehow calm my laughing fit while the teacher yelled out instructions. Hotels in Kyoto were always packed, so our

school had to take us out of the prefecture to Lake Biwa in Shiga. It was a popular destination for elementary school field trips, second only to Mount Hiei.

Soon, we'd be on our way to our study camp. Who knew what kind of fun times awaited us there? Filled with these thoughts, I boarded the bus with Irido and swore that I'd make an opportunity for the two siblings to be alone together. And not only that. I'd make sure that the atmosphere of that situation wouldn't be strained as it usually was...but sexy.

I'd assumed that this study camp would be really serious and strict, but actually, they weren't too hard on us first-years. We had lax restrictions and a *lot* of free time. Apparently, second- and third-years had a test at the end of the day, but we didn't. Their strategy was probably for us to get accustomed to the study camp first before cracking down.

That being said, I *was* a little annoyed that they took our phones away. They definitely would've preferred to ban them altogether, but they knew that people would've snuck them in anyway. Plus, it was better if we had them in case of an emergency.

We arrived at the hotel around noon and were immediately directed to our respective rooms so that we could put our stuff down. From our room, we had a view of the horizon of the huge Lake Biwa. I made a mental note that the lakeshore at night would be a good location.

"What do we do now?" my roommate, Irido, asked while taking a book out of his bag. He looked a lot better after his nap on the bus.

Luckily for Irido, he liked reading books. The rest of us would definitely struggle to pass the time without our phones.

"We have lunch and then orientation after that. No time for books right now."

"Okay..."

If I left him to his own devices, he'd definitely spend his entire free time reading. I knew I'd have to proactively bring him outside so he could get some alone time with Irido-san.

I swiped the book he'd taken out, put it back in his bag, and then left the room with the less-than-pleased Irido. *The restaurant should be on the first floor.* I looked down at the carpet and then at the bright ceiling.

"This is what we pay the school the big bucks for, huh? How much money does our school *have*?"

"I'm a scholarship student, so I haven't paid a single yen."

"Ouch, don't flex on me like that. It hurts."

We got in the elevator and descended to the first floor, and right

when the doors opened, we were greeted by the pathetic wails of a certain someone as she darted over to us.

“Mi-Mizuto-kun! I’ve located you!!!” she cried, flinging herself onto Irido.

“Whoa.” He gently caught her. “What’s the matter, Higashira? You look like you’re about to cry.”

“I was surrounded by unfamiliar people, whether it was on the bus or in my room. I feel very alone.”

“You’re with the same people in your class, aren’t you?”

“Do you remember the names of everyone in *your* class, Mizuto-kun?”

“Uh...”

“See?!”

I glared at my enemy, Isana Higashira, who was sticking to Irido like glue, and clicked my tongue in annoyance.

“Th-The delinquent is looking at me with a piercing gaze. S-Save me, Mizuto-kun!” Higashira sputtered, hiding behind Irido’s back.

This girl was definitely still high off of her previous success! *I’m gonna tear you off of him one day!*

She brushed off my glare and moved onto a different topic while looking up at Irido with sparkling eyes.

“Mizuto-kun, by the way, did you see? This hotel has an arcade in the basement. We should go tonight!”

“I’m not much of a gamer, though...”

“Please? Being in my room is quite painful...”

“You sound like a dad who’s not getting along with his family.”

I already knew about the arcade from my research earlier, which was surprisingly well stocked despite being in a hotel. It had all sorts of arcade specialties: crane games, racing games, rhythm games, dancing games, and even games in most other major genres.

“Not bad...”

“Pardon, but I was not attempting to converse with you.”

“The more the merrier, right? Let’s invite Irido-san too. I doubt she’s much of a gamer herself, so you might actually be able to win at *something*.”

“How rude! However...you do have a point,” she grumbled.

Too easy.

“Now that I think about it... Is Yume-san not busy with her other friends?” Higashira asked.

“You never know ’til you ask. Just throw out the invitation.”

Surprisingly, Irido was the one to say this. “She’s pretty soft when it comes to you.”

“Are you *really* one to talk about being soft on her?”

“Hm?” Irido tilted his head in confusion.

You're literally the softest one on her! Haven't you realized?!

After classes were over, we ate dinner and returned to our rooms. I took a shower, but when I got out, Irido was gone. *Where are you? We're supposed to go to the arcade.*

I changed into my tracksuit and walked out of the room. The rooms on this floor were supposed to be for guys only, but I heard excited female voices nearby. There was no chance, I figured, that Irido was among them.

I scanned the hallways, but I didn't see any trace of him, which must've meant that he'd gone down to the basement already. Or... I had a hunch about where he might have gone, so I hopped on the elevator and went up to the girls' floor.

I peeked out of the elevator to make sure there weren't any teachers and then silently slipped out. Fortunately, there was no need for me to do anything that'd label me as a creep like placing my ear against each of the rooms to try and listen inside, because I heard Irido's voice from the end of the hallway.

Looks like my hunch's right. But I couldn't let my guard down. Who knew what was in store? I slowly and quietly made my way towards his voice. The question was, who was he talking to? The possible candidates on this floor were Irido-san and Isana Higashira. But if he'd purposely waited until I was in the shower to sneak out, that meant that he must be meeting with...

"You sure?"

I gasped as this clear voice echoed out. I knew who that was. I tried to calm my beating heart as I inched closer to the corner of the hallway to peek around it. As I did, I saw that there was a small meeting space with two chairs. Sitting in them were Mizuto and Yume Irido. Seeing this, I couldn't help but clench my fist in victory. *Good job reading the room, Higashira!*

"I got this."

"Okay."

They were speaking in low voices so it was hard to make out what they were saying, but that just invited my mind to try and fill in the blanks. Even if they were meeting in a deserted area of the hotel to avoid being seen, they couldn't hide the smoke that came from the fire between them. Could they have been planning a date? They had to do it secretly in person like this because our phones were confiscated.

When they finished talking, the two of them got up and went their separate ways, meaning Irido was headed towards me. I darted away and rushed back to our room. By the time Irido came back I was able to catch my breath.

"Yo. Where were you?" Even I was surprised by how naturally I

asked that. *I'm so good at acting!*

"I was thirsty."

Irido wasn't too bad either. His poker face was in full force as he lightly shook the coffee can he was holding in front of me.

Where'd you get that from? On the way back here so you could hide the fact that you met up with Irido-san? Ha ha ha! Of course, I knew better than to say anything. Plus, it was more fun to keep my knowledge hidden.

"Aren't you supposed to be meetin' up with Higashira soon? You're not gonna take a shower?" I asked while looking at the clock by my pillow.

"Nah, I'll take one later. I'll probably want to anyway."

"Hm?" *What does that mean?*

"Let's go. I bet Higashira's already there. You're coming too, aren't you?"

When we arrived at the student-filled arcade, I was taken aback by how put together it was.

"Ah, Mizuto-kun!" A girl in a red tracksuit shuffled over to us as soon as we came down the stairs.

Isana Higashira immediately tried to cling to Irido, but there was no way I was gonna let that happen. I moved in front of him, making her stop in her tracks and glare at me.

"You seem to be blocking my path."

"I *am* blocking your path."

Higashira let out a weird growl as she tried looking for ways past me. I spread my arms to further block her. *Defense! Defense!*

"Stop, you dolt!"

"Gaaah!"

Suddenly I felt a kick to the side of my ass that sent me flying. The foot that'd kicked me was small; it was unmistakably *hers*. I rubbed the place she'd kicked and glared at her.

"What the hell, Minami?! What was that for?!"

"Stop bullying Higashira-san!" Akatsuki Minami stood there in her baggy tracksuit and shook her head at me, making her trademark ponytail sway as well. Pathetically enough, the reason for the *baggy* aspect was that she was hoping she'd grow into it.

I was seriously considering exposing that to everyone here, but before I could, a black-haired girl in a sweatshirt arrived: Yume Irido.

"You shouldn't kick people out of the blue, Akatsuki-san."

"Yeah, but it's okay to kick *this* guy, Yume-chan! He'll be okay no matter how many times you kick him."

"You should just step on him."

"He's already used to that!"

Am not! Also, Irido-san, why are you still advocating for violence? I'd

prefer it if you asked for peace.

"Serves you right! The world is on my side." Higashira stuck her tongue out at me while hiding behind Irido.

"Even if the world rejects me, I will never accept you."

"Please stop starting a big battle with me in the middle," Irido said.

In the end, five of us had gathered here. Though I didn't want Akatsuki here, there was no way that she'd voluntarily separate herself from Irido-san. Even so, her being here was well within my plans.

As we entered the arcade, Akatsuki and I exchanged glances. That one look was enough to tell me that she had a plan of her own. I pretended not to notice anything and instead focused my efforts on trying to get information out of the Irido siblings.

"Have you been to this kinda arcade before, Irido?"

"No, not really."

"What about you, Irido-san?"

"Not really either."

They were trying their best to not say that this was their first time. *God, they're so bad at hiding things! How are you still hiding your past relationship from your parents?!*

"Hey, what should we play? I bet you're really good at games, Higashira-san!" Akatsuki said, skipping into the arcade.

"Are you trying to imply that I am well versed in games because I'm an otaku?"

"No, I'm *saying* that."

"I'm not very strong when it comes to competitive games, so I'm more interested in trying the rhythm games."

"Oooh. That sounds fun! What about that one?" Akatsuki asked, pointing to a dancing game.

It was the type where you had to step on the buttons at the right time. I knew what Akatsuki was going for. With rhythm games that used your fingers to play, gamers had a little bit of an advantage since they were used to using controllers. But if it was a game where you had to use your feet, that leveled the playing field a little. Even non-gamers who weren't too athletic or tone deaf could be good at rhythm games, so this might have been the perfect choice.

"How about this, then?" I immediately proposed my idea. "Let's each take a turn, and the loser has to play a penalty game."

"Penalty game?" My ex-childhood-friend senses told me that Akatsuki was obviously very unhappy with my idea.

Really, she barely even sounded like she hated the idea, but I knew that internally she wanted to yell at me. But this was going to cater to both of our advantages.

“It won’t be anything dirty. Lemme see...” *What would be good? It has to be something simple enough that they won’t be against it but also something that’ll bring the two of them together.*

“How about pet names?” Irido-san surprisingly suggested, prompting everyone to look at her, making her panic a little. “W-Well, I just thought that despite us all spending time together rather frequently, we don’t call each other by any nicknames.”

She has a point. We all call each other by our last names. Even Akatsuki and I do—out loud, at least.

Irido scowled. “Where’d you get that idea from? A mixer?”

“Wh-What?! I’ve never been to a m-mixer!” Yume stammered.

“I quite like the idea,” Higashira said, slightly tilting her head. “Though I call Mizuto-kun by his first name, he always calls me by my last name. It certainly is something that is on my mind, so I would like to take this opportunity to have him call me Icchan!”

“That sounds more like a reward than a penalty... Anyway, changing what we call each other indefinitely goes beyond the scope of this penalty game.”

“How about we enforce a time limit?” Akatsuki asked, butting in. “The two losers have to call each other by a nickname for the entire duration of the study camp! How’s that sound? Sounds good, right? That way, nobody gets hurt.”

Irido went silent and looked between all of us. “Okay, that works.”

“All right!”

Akatsuki licked her lips, and at the same time, I internally clenched my fist in victory. Things were going in a very fun direction. All that was left was to make sure that the two of them lost. Truth be told, this wasn’t my first time playing this game...nor was it Akatsuki’s. This meant that we were guaranteed to be the top two in this group, leaving the Irido siblings with a high chance of getting the penalty game. The only thing left to worry about was what Akatsuki would do.

“You first, Higashira-san.”

“Wait, just me? There are two machines, though.”

As she said, there were two of these games next to each other, and nobody else was waiting to play. It was obviously designed for two people to play at once.

“You can show us how it’s done. You’re the most experienced out of all of us. We’ll go after seeing how everything works,” Akatsuki explained.

“When you put it that way...”

After being swayed by her words, Akatsuki led Higashira to the machine. *What are you doing? Are you trying to get in my way? But*

before I could be confused any further, the music started.

Higashira began jumping on the arrows indicated on the screen. Her movements were so slow and clunky, but surprisingly, she barely missed any notes. I guess when it came to games, she was just built differently. If she was at this level, it'd be easy for her to place above the Irido siblings.

"Higashira-san," Akatsuki suddenly appeared in front of Higashira. "Your tits are really shakin'!"

"Hyah?!"

"Wha?!"

I immediately ran over to Irido and covered his eyes with my hand. I hadn't noticed her trap's setup because I was standing behind Higashira. I needed to protect Irido's eyes! But just as I was putting my hand over his left eye, I felt someone else's hand. It was Irido-san's.

"Um...I can't see."

"You don't have to!"

"Deal with it!"

Irido-san and I had yelled out at the same time.

You're so cute, Irido-san. You don't want him to look at any other girl. Looked like I wasn't needed here. I took my hand off his eye and Irido-san frantically moved in to cover it. It was like she was playing that game where you go behind someone, cover their eyes, and ask them to guess who it is. *Yeah, they're good without me.*

"Whew, swing low, sweet chariots! Boing, boing! Swish, swish!"

"Please stop adding sound effects!!!"

While I'd been distracted with Irido, Akatsuki had been verbally attacking Higashira, making her miss notes over and over. *Crap, this was her plan? She wants to have Irido and Higashira lose! Dammit, this isn't the time to ogle the two of them!*

Higashira had somehow managed to finish the song without failing. She squeezed her boobs with both arms, her face completely red, and stepped off of the platform.

"I cannot play this game any further."

"That's a bad attitude. You won't be able to exercise at all like that! Oh, I know! How about we destroy those boobs of yours?!"

"Please don't say something so frightening with such a joyful expression!" Higashira ran to hide behind Irido, who promptly began patting her head to console her.

"Give her a break, Minami-san," said Irido. "You'd take away her one redeeming factor."

"Do you think that I'm nothing but breasts, Mizuto-kun?"

"You're the one that always says that."

"Oh, right."

Really? Then she can't complain if someone destroys them.

Akatsuki laughed it off as a joke while Irido-san stared at her.

"Okay, then you two go next." Irido-san gestured to me and Akatsuki.

"Huh? Why?"

"I don't want you making weird sound effects when it's my turn, so I'd prefer if you were too tired to do that."

"You make it sound like I'm some kind of gremlin that makes sound effects for all types of boobs!"

Higashira made the sound of wind whistling across a prairie, which prompted Akatsuki to snap back at her. It looked like Akatsuki was about to attack Higashira like the feral, flat-chested, shrimpy animal she was, so I swooped her up and brought her to the platform.

With the way Higashira had scored, it wouldn't be too hard for us to beat her. The only thing was whether or not the two siblings could get a higher score. It wasn't a bad feeling to be the deciding factor in the outcome.

"Don't you dare miss any notes."

"Same goes for you."

The two of us whispered to each other, but really, we had nothing to worry about. Beating Higashira's pitiful score was a given—an act of god. The song began and we began stepping in perfect rhythm to the notes that appeared on the screen.

"Wow," Higashira cooed. "You two are skilled."

Of course we're good at this. We used to play this kind of game all the time back in the day. Suddenly, I realized that I didn't hear any comments from the Irido siblings. I glanced behind me and saw that they weren't there. *Where'd they go?!* But I got my answer soon enough. In front of me, past the game screen, Irido was pulling Irido-san's arm to stand in front of us.

"Wait! What are you—"

"I told you to leave it to me, didn't I?"

Both Akatsuki and I looked at the two of them, and then...



“M-Meow!”

“What?!”

“Pfft!”

In this exact order, that went Irido-san, Akatsuki, and me.

H-He’s... Her shoulder... He’s holding her shoulder! Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What?! Wait... What was I doing? By the time I regained my sanity, the game kindly informed me that I’d failed. The two siblings were now over a meter apart from each other, but Irido-san was still red in the face. It was as if time had skipped forward. I was so impressed that I spaced out.

“Ah...” A soft voice sounded from beside me.

Both Akatsuki and I had failed, which meant we’d both scored lower than Higashira.

“Heh heh heh...” Suddenly, there was a creepy laugh from behind us.

“Heh...”

“Heh heh heh!”

Then there were two other laughs that came from the Irido siblings. *What’s happening?*

“So, remind me. What was the penalty for the losers?”

“It was to call each other by a nickname, right?”

The two of them confirmed this with each other and stood on the platform. Though they weren’t good at the game, they at least passed the song, meaning that the two lowest scorers and recipients of the penalty game were decided.

Irido-san grinned at the two of us. “This was *your* idea. I’m sure you have no complaints, right?”

Childhood Friends No More

Part 2 of 2

Mizuto Irido

One night had passed since we successfully tricked Kawanami and Minami-san. Now, we were at our hotel's breakfast buffet, which sported lighter food selections such as bread, fruits, ham, and sausage. I tried to hold back a yawn as I placed a croissant on my tray. Kogure Kawanami stood next to me, loading up on sausage, when suddenly, he froze. I followed his gaze to see Yume with a certain girl in tow—Akatsuki Minami.

As soon as she laid eyes on Kawanami, she froze in place. But their reactions to each other only lasted a brief moment before they turned and tried going their separate ways.

"Where do you think..." I started.

"...You're going?" Yume finished.

Yume and I promptly stopped Minami-san and Kawanami by grabbing their respective shoulders. Kawanami shot me a pleading look, but that wasn't enough to get me to let go. We dragged them to our table, where Higashira was already sitting. I moved Kawanami one seat away from her and sat in between them, while Yume sat across from Higashira after seating Minami-san in front of Kawanami.

"Have fun, you two," Yume teased with a satisfied smile.

"Yes, enjoy yourselves," Higashira parroted while stuffing her face with sausage.

I began tearing off pieces of my croissant and tossing them into my mouth, glancing out of the corner of my eye at the two childhood friends who were actively avoiding any and all interaction with each other. They were doing their best to stay dead-focused on eating as they scarfed down their plates at incredible speeds. They wanted to get out of here as quickly as possible, but I wasn't about to let them off that easily.

"Don't you two know how to even say 'hello' anymore?"

They trembled a little before glancing at each other.

"Morning."

"Mornin'."

"And who are you saying that to?" Yume asked, a wide smile spreading across her face.

A very sour and disgusted look spread across both their faces, but after a few seconds, they forcibly smiled at each other and tried again in very cheerful voices.

"Morning, A-chan!"

“Mornin’, Ko-kun!”

“Pfft.” Higashira almost did a spit take and keeled over, shaking from laughter.

Yume had to cover her mouth with both her hands, but was successful in holding back her laughter at the exchange between the two childhood friends who were currently trying their best to maintain their smiles at one another. But then Minami-san’s face twitched, and she slammed her head against the table.

“Give me a break! Seriously!!! What is this, revenge?! Is this for all the unfiltered things I’ve said?!”

At this point, Yume and Higashira were both cackling, their whole bodies shaking with laughter. The purpose of this exercise was not revenge, but something much purer. This was one hundred percent out of the goodwill of our hearts. Some people might not have seen it that way, but that didn’t change the truth about our intentions.

It had all started at the beginning of summer vacation, when lo and behold, Yume came to me for advice for one of the first times in her life.

“What do you think about Kawanami-kun and Akatsuki-san?”

“What?” I responded, furrowing my brow.

It was the middle of the afternoon, and we were both sitting in the living room. This question had come out of absolutely nowhere. I didn’t have much of an answer for her, besides that those two had more than a few screws loose, but I highly doubted that was the answer she was looking for. So instead, I took a little bit of time to think before responding.

“Those two have more than a few screws loose.”

“I don’t want your impressions of them as people! Also, how are they crazy?!”

Don’t blame me. No matter how hard I rack my brain, that’s the only thing I can come up with. How did she want me to respond?

“Look, the two of them are childhood friends, right?” she pressed.

“Apparently.”

“On the outside, they don’t get along, but that probably means they’re actually really close... So, I’m wondering...you know...what their relationship is really like?”

“So you wanna know if they get along in a ‘boy and girl’ way.”

“Yeah! Exactly!”

She was probably better off not knowing, but it’s not like I knew the full story either. I figured they most likely had the same circumstances as we did. If she knew that, I doubt she’d innocently ask if there were any kind of romantic feelings between them. But then again, there was only one person who knew the entire situation but

was pushy about *our* relationship.

“I never thought you’d wanna gossip about romance with me. Don’t you have friends?”

“You’re the last person who should ask that! Plus, it’s not like that. Akatsuki-san is lonelier than she looks. I was just thinking it’d be nice if she was on good terms with her childhood friend again at least...”

She claimed that Minami-san was lonely, but from my point of view, it wasn’t something as cute and simple as that. The problem between the two of them should stay between them. We had no right to stick our noses in their business...or at least from an objective, moralistic standpoint, that’d be true.

However, perhaps this was a good opportunity. The self-proclaimed ROM expert, Kogure Kawanami, had done and said a lot about my situation with Yume. He played with us as if we were characters in a game, so maybe it was finally time for him to get a taste of his own medicine.

As a ROM expert, he enjoyed being an observer, but maybe it was time for him to be in the shit and be the “observee.” Nietzsche once said, “If you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.” Kawanami was overdue for his just deserts.

Before taking any action, I needed to do some research. So I made up an excuse to go over to Kawanami’s place and had him recount a memory of Minami-san. What I got was a chilling account of her breaking various laws, but ultimately, it told me what I needed to know—they were close, without a doubt. In fact, they were almost like siblings.

After confirming that, I knew my objective was to have them reminisce about their old relationship together. It was great, because I could also have them relive all the painful memories of the past while doing so—two birds, one stone.

The only problem was the “how” of the entire situation. How was I supposed to have them remember their old relationship? When stuck, it’s best to ask an expert.

“And that’s why I need your help, Higashira.”

“I don’t believe I am exactly an *authority* on childhood friends...” she said, flipping through pages of the book she was reading. She lay with her head on my lap as I sat cross-legged on my bed. “I also was not aware of the childhood friend relationship between Minami-san and that gaudy male.”

“Yeah, they ‘used to be’ childhood friends, but insist that they aren’t anymore.”

“Amazing. I thought childhood friends were fictional.”

“Any kind of relationship between people sounds fictitious to you.”

“I meant in the sense that I’ve only ever encountered these kinds of relationships through hearsay. They’re plenty fictitious to me.”

“So how would you classify a childhood friend?”

“Hm... You phrased the question as if I am identifying an animal’s genus. However, this is real life, so if I had to say... They are childhood friends if they promised to marry each other.”

“They usually do that when they’re kids. I doubt most of them even remember it.”

“Don’t crush my dreams!” Higashira protested, thrashing her legs and lightly hitting my face in a fit. “I suppose the only other thing would be...perhaps a sobriquet?”

“Nicknames?”

“They call each other by their last names, do they not? Don’t you find that strange? They’re practically family. Wouldn’t it get confusing when they’re addressing each other’s parents?”

Higashira had a point. Even Yume and I referred to each other by our first names at home.

“Furthermore, if they have been companions since childhood, then they are sure to have called each other by some manner of adorable epithet. Perhaps similar to the protagonist and heroine in this very light novel I’m reading.”

“I see... So the question is, how do we get them to use those names again?”

Truth be told, I thought coming to Higashira might’ve been a dead end, but she had better insight than I’d expected. I could probably do something with pet names.

“Thanks, Higashira. I might need your help later.”

“No problem. If we are successful in reuniting that gaudy *male* and Minami-san, that will leave you completely free for me!”

“I’m not free. I come with a pretty high tax.”

“I must pay tax?!”

That’s how I came up with the idea for a penalty game in which the losers would have to call each other by pet names. I had Higashira talk about the arcade in front of Kawanami in order to lure him into the trap, and right before we did anything, I secretly met with Yume to go over the details.

“But then, we have to ensure that both Akatsuki-san and Kawanami-kun lose. How are we supposed to do that?” Yume had said, expressing her concern.

“I have an idea. I got this.”

“Okay...”

And the rest is history. Everything went according to my plan. Now, Kogure Kawanami and Akatsuki Minami had to return to being childhood friends for the duration of this study camp.

“That went even better than I expected,” Yume said through a soft snicker.

There was a break between breakfast and the first lecture of the day, so I was currently with Yume in a corner of the hotel’s luxurious lobby, discussing our plan. After having more than their fill of being teased, Kawanami and Minami-san had run off, which was surprising considering how social they were. One would’ve thought that they could handle a little playfulness. The plan was working on them better than I’d expected if they had to resort to physical methods of escape.

“But still, what was that?” Yume asked out of the blue.

“What was what?”

“Well...” Yume gently grasped her own shoulder.

Seeing her do that instantly made me realize she was talking about me grabbing her shoulder in order to trip the two of them up.

“The ends justify the means,” I explained indifferently. “I ran through all the possibilities and concluded that was the most effective and logical solution in order to get the desired result. That’s it.”

“I really wish you wouldn’t grab my shoulder just because of your calculations.”

“My bad.”

Yume shifted her eyes away, looking unsatisfied with my sincere apology. *Did you not want me to apologize for that?! What do you want from me?*

“Either way, you got what you wanted. You done now?” I asked.

I had the slightest feeling that there was more to this, so I tried pressing her for more information about the topic at hand, but she once again shot me an unsatisfied look.

“I think we should watch over them a little more. I’ve never seen Akatsuki-san like that,” she said, trying to stifle another laugh.

I was seriously surprised by how suddenly both Yume *and* Higashira had turned into Kawanami.

“I wonder if there’ll be any opportunity to get them alone somewhere. The real problem is getting them to talk to each other, though...” Yume continued, putting her fist to her chin in contemplation.

As much as I wanted nothing more to do with this, Yume didn’t know how dangerous Minami-san was, so I couldn’t exactly leave her unattended. Maybe being a ROM expert was harder than it looked. What’s so fun about breaking your back to get us together, Kawanami?

Akatsuki Minami

This has gotta be karma for trying to marry Irido-kun and trying to manipulate Higashira-san. I had no right to treat others like they were pawns by preying on their romantic feelings.

“K-Ko-kun, what’s the next class?”

“It’s world history...A-A-chan...”

This shouldn’t have been so hard for me. These were just our childhood nicknames, so it shouldn’t have made me so nervous. There was absolutely nothing embarrassing about this, and yet...

“Minami-chan, didya call Kawanami, ‘Ko-kun?’” Nasuka-chan asked me after class ended.

“Gah!” I let out a sound as if someone had stepped on my stomach.

“She did! I heard her! So, what’s the scoop? Are you two dating?” Maki-chan’s eyes sparkled as she closed in on me.

“We’re not! This is just...a penalty game.”

“Penalty game? Of the group date variety, mayhap?” Nasuka-chan asked, tilting her head in confusion.

“Oh right, you went out somewhere last night. So that’s where you—”

“No! Who in their right mind would go on a group date during study camp?!”

Maki-chan snickered at my exclamation.

“Well, ya said somethin’ ’bout a penalty game, but you two look pretty natural callin’ each other that,” Nasuka-chan said. “Y’all actin’ thicker than thieves.”

“Totally! Nickname aside, it’s like you’re gentler around him.”

“God! I tried being as quiet as possible so I wouldn’t have to go through this! Screw your good hearing!”

“I think ya two suit each other. Peas in a pod.”

“Same! Kawanami looks like he screws around, but I bet you could keep him on a tight leash, Akki!”

“But I bet she’ll be all sorts a nice to ’im when they’re alone.”

“Doting on him? Totes! Oh, that’s so cute!”

I covered my ears to shut out their fantasies. *I’m “gentle” with him? I’d “dote” on him?* There was no way I’d do any of that...not anymore. The girl who’d do that was supposed to have died already. Just reverting to the old name I used to call him wasn’t enough to revive her...and I’d be damned if I let her come back.

Kogure Kawanami

“I’m beat...” I had absolutely zero energy after morning classes. How did everyone have such good ears?! I’d tried to be as quiet as

possible so nobody would hear me, but that didn't seem to matter. *Is hearing people call each other pet names really that much fun?!*

I vowed to eat lunch by myself. Not being able to observe the Irido siblings would suck, but I had no intention of being forced to sit with *her*. I shuddered to think of anyone seeing us chummily eating lunch together.

Unlike at breakfast, our seats were assigned based on our last names. Since my last name started with K and hers with M, we shouldn't have been sitting right next to each other, and yet...

"Why are you here?"

"..."

Sitting right across from me was a shrimpy girl. She immediately turned her head away in annoyance without saying a word. At the very least, I could tell that this arrangement wasn't by her design. I glanced over at the seat she should've been sitting in and grinning back at me was some random girl. *This has gotten a lot bigger than I expected.* I lightly knocked on the table to draw Akatsuki's attention.

"This isn't looking good. If we're not careful, this could go on even after study camp ends."

"We're usually on the teasing side. This is our punishment..."

"How likely is it that people'll forget about this over summer break?"

"I'm sure the guys'll forget, but the girls definitely won't."

"So we have no choice but to wear them out by playing this to its fullest."

"God, this seriously sucks!" Akatsuki let out a deep sigh, but her eyes were filled with determination.

I did the same and willed my body to suck it up. *What's about to happen right now is just an act. Don't get the wrong idea.* Then, just as lunch we were about to eat, something completely unexpected happened.

"Hm? Minami-san, aren'tcha gonna feed *Ko-kun*?" a random girl asked jokingly.

I knew she had no malicious intent and was just joining in on the fun. If she could embarrass Akatsuki, it'd be fun for everyone, and then people would build off of that and poke fun at us even more.

Alternatively, maybe she thought it was a sure-fire joke with potential to become an inside joke that we could all laugh about in the second semester.

But it didn't matter, because I wasn't going to allow it. I wanted this to all end here. *What happens at study camp, stays at study camp.* To ensure that, I was willing to sacrifice myself a little.

"Okay, Ko-kun, say 'ah.'"

"Ahhh."

Akatsuki hesitantly stuck out her spoon towards my mouth and I bit down without a second thought. Trying to reenact our time from when we'd dated, both of us were all smiles and speaking in sickeningly sweet tones. The crowd around us reacted with cheers and wolf whistles. *Good. Just as planned.*

"How is it, Ko-kun? Tasty?"

"Your cooking tastes better!"

"Oh, you! You've never eaten my cooking before!!!"

"Hngh?!" I felt someone stomp on my foot as the people around us laughed.

She's not holding back at all! This bitch is seriously tryna crush my foot! Doesn't she know that acting all embarrassed and not hiding her hatred has the opposite effect?! But at any rate, if that was how she was going to play it, then I had an idea too.

I did my best not to let any of my real emotions show and instead tried to end this farce. *I'm gonna do something that plays right into this situation!*



“Okay, A-chan, open wide!”

“Aw, no thanks. I’ll pass!”

“Why?!”

“You kinda smell...y’know?”

“Stop taking advantage of the situation to diss me!!!”

We acted the hell out of our stupid couple performance to the audience, and perhaps it was thanks to that that nobody noticed we finished our meals using the same spoon that’d touched both our mouths without a word of complaint.

“I’ve got to hand it to you,” Irido said expressionlessly after lunch as I was heading to the bathroom. “I never thought you’d get outta this like that. This is the first time I’ve ever thought you’re amazing.”

“Heh. Didn’t I tell you? The two of us are master extroverts.”

“Right. You said it back then: ‘That’s just ’cuz the two of us have high social skills—y’know, that thing where someone can get along with someone even if they don’t really like them.’”

I couldn’t believe he remembered all of that. *I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what I said back when he stayed the night at my place.*

“I have to say,” he continued, “I’m surprised this has spread so much. I was a little worried, but it looks like I didn’t need to be.”

“Yeah, we’re not like a certain pair who’d clam up and fidget in place all innocently. Sorry to burst your bubble.”

Irido smirked and nodded. “True. I don’t think there’s anyone who could keep their cool like you did while publicly flirting like that.”

“You got that right,” I said, smoothly moving my arms behind my back. “Anyway, you done? I’m about to wet myself.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry...for a lot of things.”

I left Irido and ran off to the bathroom, where I made sure nobody else was around. Instead of going to the urinal, I went to the sink, turned on the faucet, cupped my hands to catch the water, and then splashed it on my face.

“Dammit. It’s just a gag. It’s not real.”

It’s a joke. Fiction. Total lie. There are absolutely no emotions involved. And yet...why were my arms covered in hives? Why are humans so inflexible? I knew the answer, but no matter how many times I told myself, my body reacted to the situation as if I was right back in the past.

All that should’ve been far behind me. I had no use for any of those memories anymore...or so I thought. The memories hadn’t disappeared and seeing her face like that, as if she wasn’t bothered at all...how do I put it. Guys “save as,” while girls overwrite files. I’d simply saved our memories under a different name while she

overwrote them completely. *Heh. I'm so jealous.*

Akatsuki Minami

“AAAAAHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!”

That was so, sooo, sooooo, soooooooo, soooooooo embarrassing!
Utterly humiliating!!!

I'd run back to my empty room and rolled around on the bed in anguish. I couldn't believe I'd acted like that—that I'd *spoken* to him like that—right in front of everyone! *Aaaagh! Stop! Get out of my head! I've grown out of that! I don't want to remember!!! Kill me now! Also, please make it so that none of that happened!*

I wanted to scream. I'd been doing so well in high school up until now. But also, why the hell did he look so unfazed when I was in complete agony?! How's that fair?! I didn't even see any hives on him!

Did that mean that no matter how much I flirted with him, he didn't feel anything anymore?! How's that fair when he used to get red at even the slightest thing?! I gnawed my pillow out of frustration when suddenly, I heard the click of the door opening.

“Oh, Akatsuki-san. There you are.”

“Ah... Y-Yume-chan?”

As soon as I saw her long black hair, I quickly hid the pillow I'd been biting behind me. She approached me with an apologetic face.

“I'm sorry... I didn't think this'd become such a big thing.”

“Huh? O-Oh! It's okay! This is nothing!”

“Are you sure?”

She could've kept laughing like she did this morning, but Yume-chan was just too nice of a girl. *God, I love her. I wanna be with her forever.* Her being here cleansed me of all the frustration I felt towards Ko-kun.

“Yep! It'd be weirder if we stopped at this point, so we'll keep this up until study camp's over. I'm used to acting, anyway...but Ko-kun might be better than I am in that regard! Ha ha ha!”

“Ko-kun?”

“Hm? What?”

“No, it's just that...you don't have to call him that if he's not around.”

“Ah...” *I goofed.*

“...”

“Q-Quit grinning, Yume-chan! That was just a slip of the tongue!”

“Yeah, sure it was. A total slip of the tongue. Heh heh heh. You really did call him that when you were kids, didn't you? Pfft. Ha ha ha!”

“Huh?!”

How'd she know I used to call him that? But before I could even

ask her, Yume-chan laughed even harder.

"It all makes sense!" she exclaimed. "How else would you two come up with pet names for each other so fast? Not to mention how naturally you used them! Aha ha ha!"

I'd made the mistake of a lifetime. I buried my face into the pillow, and as I did, I felt Yume-chan approach me on the bed.

"What's wrong with that? You can call each other like you used to when you were kids. It's very fitting for childhood friends."

"We're *not* childhood friends!"

"Why do you have to insist on that?"

"Yume-chan..." I continued, lowering my voice. "Even if we were close when we were little, it's not guaranteed that we'll be close forever. Things go to crap more often than not. It's totally possible to lose an entire relationship."

"But *you two* still talk to each other. You still have a relationship."

"Yeah, but..."

"Well, I just think it's a waste for you two to stubbornly reject each other."

It would've made sense if we'd completely stopped interacting with each other long ago. But we were neighbors, and it wasn't like either of us had the power to simply move away. Because we didn't change what school we were going to, because we used to be childhood friends, and because we still saw each other now and then, maybe... Maybe it wasn't too late.

If we could stay like childhood friends...like a couple...could there still be a chance for us?

Yume Irido

"Yume-san, listen to this!" Higashira-san enthusiastically approached me during study hall.

However, unlike regular study hall, this was more of a period of time set aside so that students could ask teachers questions. Right now, the teacher was busy talking with another student, so Higashira-san had used this opening to ask me a question of her own.

"What is it, Higashira-san? You seem happy."

"Ehe heh heh. No, not at all. Ehe heh heh!" She looked positively giddy, like she'd passed a test to get into her dream school or successfully confessed to someone.

I had my doubts as to why her face was so rife with ecstasy, but I let her continue talking.

"One of our classmates talked to me. Me!"

"Huh? About what?"

"They asked me, 'Are you going out with Irido-kun from class seven?' Me!"

My heart stopped while Higashira-san abashedly rubbed her cheeks like a lovestruck schoolgirl.

“Ehe heh heh. Do we really come across as a couple that much? How troublesome! Ehe heh heh! We are in fact *not* a couple whatsoever. Ehe heh heh!”

This was a very “special” way for someone to get elated. She looked so happy that it made me feel happy too, even though internally, I felt as scrambled and complicated as a marble pattern.

“Well, I suppose if you spend the majority of your time with someone, those kinds of rumors do get started...” I said. “Yes. It is a little surprising that the two of you have become subject to such rumors despite not exactly standing out, though...”

“Well, Yume-san, were you aware that Mizuto-kun is actually quite popular?”

“Huh?” *Come again?*

“In all likelihood, it stems from the fact that he placed first during midterms. I’ve heard people say things such as, ‘Not only is he smart, but he’s actually kinda cute if you take a good look at him.’ That was a comment from the people who inquired whether or not we were dating. Then they said, ‘I’m so jealous of how close you are with Irido-kun!’ Ehe heh heh!”

Her laughter was rife with superiority. But this was...news to me. It made sense, though... I’d only achieved my current status due to achieving first place on the entrance exam, so it was only natural that he’d gain popularity with the girls for getting first on the midterms. But...*him*? Popular?

I had particular trouble with that. It didn’t seem real. Were there really a lot of girls with their eyes on him? They had no chance though. He was certain to turn him down. But then again, would they even confess if they thought that Higashira-san was his girlfriend?

“S-So... Ahem. How did you...respond, Higashira-san?” I asked with a sense of urgency, the origins of which I was unaware of.

“Well, of course, I...” Higashira-san smiled proudly. “I properly said, ‘No, we’re not dating.’”

“O-Oh, I see.”

“More accurately, I said, ‘No, we’re not dating. We’re just *very* good friends.’”

“You sound like a celebrity trying to hide their relationship!”

People would *definitely* read into that! There was absolutely no way anyone would take that at face value.

“Well... You know... It just felt kind of good to be in that position.”

“You’ve *really* let this get to your head! You shouldn’t be misleading people!”

“When have I misled anyone? I merely stated something in a way that some may construe as us getting married in the future. I do not see a problem.”

“I guess...not.”

If everyone had the wrong assumption about their relationship, that'd serve as a way to ward off girls from approaching him. He'd probably appreciate not having to be in such a bothersome position too. Maybe this was actually a good thing.

“It's quite the powerful thing, isn't it? Group mentality, that is.” Higashira-san said with a bright smile while doodling on the corner of her notebook. “Even if I didn't have romantic feelings for Mizuto-kun, with the rumors that others spread, people may perceive me as his girlfriend regardless. I'm positive that *those two* have been raised in such an environment as well. It's difficult for me to imagine what it's like, though.”

“Wait, who? What two?”

“Minami-san and that gaudy *male*. They are childhood friends, are they not? I've no doubt that they've been teased about their relationship ever since they were children.”

“Right, exactly. It's partially why I made this plan in the first place.”

“Those who do not possess a childhood friend will expect childhood friends to have a relationship with each other. Oh, it's complete!” Higashira-san said, putting her pen down.

She'd drawn a boy and a girl happily chatting through the windows of their adjacent houses. *Wow, she's a great artist.*

“It's similar to how some people may idolize having a little sister despite not having one of their own. However, opposite sex childhood friends are much rarer of a breed than little sisters. Most people assume that they have some kind of romantic involvement. It's wholly possible that in order to live up to the expectations of others, they felt as if they needed to begin that kind of relationship.”

“True... But would they really act like your average manga trope? They're not fictional characters who follow a set plan. Even during lunch, that was all just an act that they put on...”

“If that's the case, then wouldn't having them call each other by pet names also be another act that we're making them do?”

I fell silent. We were making them call each other by pet names because we were expecting them to grow more aware of each other. It was almost as if we were unconsciously ordering them to do that. Maybe we hadn't really taken their feelings into consideration.

“Well, if I could add one more thing,” Higashira-san said as she tapped her art. “Real life childhood friends are different from fictional ones. How utterly dream crushing.”

I'd be lying if I said I never idolized the idea of childhood friends. I'd constantly seen them in manga and anime. There was someone who lived next to me, who'd been raised with me almost like a sibling, and whom I'd made a ton of memories with when we were little. As we grew older, I became more drawn to the ideal, desirable, and beautiful dream of being childhood friends.

A lot of people have fantasized about having that kind of special existence in their life. I highly doubted there was anyone who didn't ever think that it'd be nice if they had a childhood friend of the opposite gender. If anyone claimed that they didn't, I'd totally expose them.

Everyone, and I mean *everyone*, is looking for their role. Some are leaders, some are gloomy kids, some are class representatives, and some are brats—everyone has a role that they play. Then we, myself included, perceive that person as the role that they're playing, and then we have fun rehashing the same things over and over again, just like celebrities on TV or content creators.

That's probably why I perceived Ko-kun as someone in the childhood friend role. I wasn't able to draw a line between fantasy and reality. I'd believed from the bottom of my heart that we were in some kind of romantic relationship like it was straight out of an anime or manga. That's why all that happened.

Because I believed he was my childhood friend, I thought destiny had brought us together. That meant that no matter what I did, Ko-kun would accept me... He'd understand me. I had it all wrong. I knew—I was fully aware of how stupid I was, but still...even still... I had every desire to make Ko-kun happy. That's all I ever wanted to do.

“So please...believe me. Believe me...”

“Believe you?! Like hell I can believe you! Do you know what you've done to me?! How dare you spew that bullshit at me! You crazy? You have to be crazy! Otherwise, why the hell wouldn't you give me my own chopsticks? Why wouldn't you let me go to the convenience store by myself?! Why would you get mad at me when I was on day duty with another girl?! But sure, it's all my fault, right?! It's my fault for being friends with a psycho like you!!! What the hell are you crying for?! I'm the one who should be crying! Give it back! Give back the months you stole from me! Give back all the time you stole from me!”

Kogure Kawanami

I'd never had trouble making friends for as long as I could remember. It'd always been as easy as breathing to me. I didn't know

what it meant to be wary of strangers. I didn't know what it meant to be shy. I could make friends with anyone, anywhere. As natural as breathing.

Maybe this was just a certain kind of survival strategy. I have a faint memory of when I was a baby. My mom was smiling at me, just before I fell asleep, and she let out a tired sigh. It's very vague and fuzzy, so I thought it might be a dream, but still. It gave me purpose: I needed to be able to live on my own. I didn't want to make even one person sigh over my existence.

This desire came too early in my life to be labeled as an obsession, but it was definitely something that was embedded deep inside me and helped shape who I am. Because I was like that, though, I was never lonely, no matter where I went. If anything, I was proud that I could go out by myself. Loneliness was never something I experienced.

Even so, I felt at ease when I was with A-chan, which may sound weird after I just spent a good bit of time talking about how I didn't feel anxiety or anything. But being with her just felt right—like I was supposed to be there.

A-chan was there even if I wasn't trying to be friendly. A-chan was there even if I was lazing around. A-chan understood me even if I didn't say anything. It was the same kind of relief people felt when they reached a save point in a game. But that was just my arrogance.

“Oh.”

“Ah...”

I ran into Akatsuki on my way to the bathroom during our afternoon classes. I didn't really know why, but I averted my gaze. Nobody else was around. We didn't have to put on that stupid act right now. There was also no reason for me to call her by her old nickname, “A-chan.”

Then why did I feel so awkward? A chill ran up my neck, as if warning me to leave. I wanted nothing more than to run away, but I hesitated.

This was all *their* fault for making us call each other by our old nicknames. I'd finally gotten comfortable being apart from her, but now that feeling was broken.

We had a horrible breakup, and our nearly ten-year bond got completely messed up. But even so, I didn't want anyone to worry about me, so I didn't tell them about Akatsuki. Instead, I told them that I got an ulcer from the stress of studying for entrance exams.

Even though we should've had nothing to do with each other anymore, we acted like nothing had happened—and for better or worse, I had the ability to play along. This was due to the two of us having high social skills. We were able to get along with someone

even if we didn't really like them.

Since we were so good at it, we'd been able to keep up appearances until today. I never expected that everything I'd so carefully constructed would come crumbling down over something so simple as nicknames. I had no clue how to talk to her anymore.

Was I supposed to talk to her like I used to? No way. Was I supposed to talk to her like I did yesterday? Absolutely not. I wasn't in the right role to succeed at talking to her. I couldn't find the words to say. I scratched the back of my neck and looked around. Knowing I was acting like this pissed me off to no end.

"What's with you?" her small, reserved voice came, snapping me out of my thoughts.

Her eyes were fierce, like she was picking a fight, but her voice was filled with doubt. She was trying to play the role that she'd developed—an anti-me role—but this was just a shadow of that. She was falling apart at the seams. It was really a sad sight. Even so, Akatsuki didn't back down.

"That was just a joke. If you get embarrassed, it's kinda..."

"E-Embarrassed? No, I was just thinking that even without anyone around, you're acting like this, A-chan—"

"A-chan?"

"Wait, no! I just haven't switched back yet!"

"It's whatever. This is a penalty game after all. Yeah..."

Her words lacked certainty and were riddled with doubt and hesitation. She was lost, just like I, and still trying to figure out how to talk to me. The mask she'd worked so hard to create was coming undone, and I was starting to see her true thoughts underneath it. It was becoming harder for her to play it off. It was as if we understood each other...just like back then, before we dated. But why...?

"Well y'know, it's like, if you get too used to calling me that, other girls are gonna hear, and...I don't think it'd be great if this nickname spreads any further."

You're bothered by it too, aren't you? It makes you uncomfortable. That's why you look like that, right? Then...why wasn't my body reacting? I didn't feel sick, nor did I sense any hives coming on. Why wasn't my overactive self-consciousness doing anything? Why did her words sound so hollow?

"It'd suck for you too, right? It'd be bad for Yume-chan too if this gets outta control," she continued.

God... What a stupid reason.

"Good point. It'd be annoying if this got any bigger. I'll be careful."

"Huh?"

"It'd suck if we made Irido-san feel guilty. You should be careful

too.”

So stupid. What the hell? Why did I play along? Maybe I thought we could be like the Irido siblings. Of course we couldn't. Our relationship wasn't bittersweet like theirs. It wasn't as precious as theirs. We were much more stupid, idiotic, and dim-witted. We were broken.

Stop dreaming. There's no chance for us to reconcile. Not anymore.

“Later. I'm goin' to the bathroom.” I waved my hand and passed her.

So simple and so devoid of any hesitation. No irritation or commotion. It was really easy and really simple.

“W-Wait!”

“What?”

I turned around. After all, isn't that normal when someone calls your name? I wasn't trying to pick a fight or anything. Akatsuki opened her mouth as if she was about to say something, but then she exhaled as if she'd decided not to. A smile spread across her face.

“Nothing! Just wanted to try calling out to you.”

“Ew.”

“Huh?!”

I let out a laugh and turned around.

There was the sound of a sigh, but whose was it? *Seriously...so stupid.*

Akatsuki Minami

“Believe me.” I had no right to say those words. Why did I ever think about whether or not it was too late? How naive *was* I? We were just pretending to have returned to how we were back then. There was no trace of my old self in who I was now. We were completely different people.

I let out a sigh. *It was fun, though, back then.* It was fun back in elementary school when I hadn't even thought about being his girlfriend. It was really fun back then...

Kogure Kawanami

And so, here we were on the final night of our three-day, two-night study camp. Surprisingly, not only did we have this time to ourselves, we were also allowed to leave the hotel and walk around. It was suspiciously good timing, in fact, because there was a festival at a nearby temple.

It was as if they were saying that they didn't want to go out of their way to prepare recreational activities for us, so we should go ahead and spend our time at the local festival. That being said, it was

totally on us to be responsible and stay out of trouble.

None of us really minded; it was better than the alternative of spending more of our precious summer vacation time in class. If anything, this was a blessing for all the guys and girls who wanted to invite that special someone out on a date to the summer festival. They'd be fools not to shoot their shots.

I saw this as the perfect time to get the Irido siblings to go to the festival together, especially since it was famous for its unique fireworks display. And these weren't the kind that'd be lit from a safe distance. No, these were massive handheld cannons that the experts would carry to shoot the fireworks up to ten meters in the air, showering the area with beautiful sparks.

I'd never seen them before, but I was sure it'd be quite the spectacle. The novelty alone was more than enough reason to ask someone to go watch with you without it being weird—but I knew there was no way the Irido siblings would go by themselves. I needed to employ some tricks to get them right where I wanted them; namely, as long as we went in the same group that had taken the arcade trip, that'd get them to the festival. Then it'd be up to me to get the two of them lost in the crowd.

Since our phones had been conveniently confiscated, they wouldn't be able to contact us to regroup. So, with that plan in mind, I left the hotel with the rest of them in tow towards the unfamiliar nightlife.

"Bow wow wow!" spilled out of Higashira's mouth.

"Could you explain what those sounds mean? I left my BowLingual in my other pants pocket," Mizuto said sarcastically.

"Allow me to translate it for you. It means, 'This is my first outing with friends at night. I'm filled with excitement!'" Higashira explained.

"Wait, let me ask you something. How good is your sense of direction?"

"Please do not take me for a fool! If I do not see mountains, then we are headed south."

"That only works if you're in Kyoto City. Absolutely do *not* get separated from us."

Things had progressed more smoothly than I'd anticipated. I'd expected some resistance from Irido to coming out like this, but he'd agreed almost immediately. It was like he hadn't realized my plans, or he'd wanted to come here with Irido-san from the start and was waiting for an opportunity to invite her. I covered my grin with my hand. Usually, I could keep my emotions in check, but it was hard to do that when I was having all this fun imagining his thought process.

As we walked to the festival, we saw other students from our

school here and there in their street clothes. I'd heard that some people brought their yukata to the study camp last year, but I guess no one did this time.

"Aw, I wanted to see you in a yukata, Yume-chan! Hey, how about we all go to a festival when we get back to Kyoto?"

"Sure. The Gion festival's already passed, but I'm sure there'll be other chances."

Akatsuki and Irido-san were chatting, a little bit ahead of us.

In general, Irido, Higashira, and Irido-san seemed more reserved than usual. I figured they'd learned their lesson and were feeling remorseful about everything. Maybe even more than I thought. They weren't trying to push me and Akatsuki together whatsoever.

Thank god for that! If the two of us had to walk next to each other, I doubt we'd be able to play it cool. I could already feel my blood boiling at the mere thought of it...

"You wanna come too, Higashira-san?"

"Huh? U-Uh, yes...if it's permitted..."

"Only if you come in a yukata! By the way, did ya know it's wrong to wear underwear with a yukata?"

"I-I believe that is an urban legend..."

"The urban legend is of it being an urban legend!"

"Akatsuki-san, you're being very transparent with your desires... You shouldn't trick Higashira-san into doing something she's not ready for."

"Perchance you were after my breasts?! You truly were just pursuing my body in this relationship!" Higashira, pouting, trotted after Akatsuki, leaving just us guys in the back.

Silence fell on us now that Higashira was gone. Irido was the first to break it.

"Kawanami, is something going on between you and Minami-san?"

"Nope. Why?" I answered immediately.

"No clue. Just a feeling."

"You a psychic now or something?" I chuckled.

"If you insist that nothing's wrong, then I won't press any further. Just so you know, I'm the ROM expert today. I'll keep my mouth shut and continue to observe." He then quickened his pace to catch up with Akatsuki and the others.

How can you keep your mouth shut when you've already said so much? What's left to say? I'm fine the way things are. After all, I was wrong. I misunderstood... It was all in my head, right?

I've always lived by a set of rules that I made in order to become a person who wouldn't cause any trouble for anyone or ever be a burden. That was the entire basis of my role.

Even so, I'd always thought there was one person who was an exception to the rule. Someone I didn't have to act out my role in front of. Someone I could actually be myself around. It was a pathetic sentiment, and one that only I carried between the two of us.

"You should be wearing lighter clothes! What's the point of those beautiful balloons if you don't show 'em off?!"

"Wha— No touching! Touching is not permitted!"

"Weren't you wearing a tank top under your hoodie when you came over?" Mizuto added. "I'm surprised you're not still in it."

"You were wearing *what* under your sweatshirt?!" Yume gasped.

"Typical," Akatsuki said, shaking her head. "Yet another thot who doesn't mind showing it all around the guy she likes."

"O-Objection! Blatant slander! I simply have a distinction between street clothes and home clothes."

"'Home clothes' are only 'home clothes' when you're in your *own* home, Higashira-san." Akatsuki cackled, surrounded by Irido and the others.

That smile, that laugh. It's all part of the role you're playing, isn't it? It's just something you made to suit this situation. It's not really you. It's not genuine. I always thought you were someone I could be myself with, but you've always hid your true self by trying to match others. I know I've never seen the real you, but even so... I can feel myself wanting to look at your smile. To listen to your laugh. If I did, then at the very least, I'd know you're having more fun than when I made you break down in tears in that hospital room. More fun than when I turned my back on you.

I silently stared at the night sky and felt myself becoming lost in the dreamlike beauty of the moon.

Yume Irido

It was inevitable that coming to a summer festival would dredge up memories of my very first date, during which I got separated from *him*, got lost, sobbed, and...was eventually found by him. Despite being sure that nobody would even look at me, he *had*. He'd found me. Up until then, I'd thought I was worthless, so when he found me, I really felt like he'd truly *found* me.

That's why from then on, I stopped putting on appearances and no longer pretended I was better than I actually was. From then on, we were Yume Ayai and Mizuto Irido. Nothing more. Nothing less.

But the longer our relationship went, the more I tried to adhere to the part of "girlfriend," hoping we could be a "normal" couple. I stopped being myself. Thinking about that really put things into perspective. *Of course it's hard to keep up a natural familial relationship for years on end, I thought, so how impressive is it for childhood friends to be like that all the time?*

“Oh, it’s starting, Yume-chan!” Akatsuki pointed towards a group of happi-wearing men standing on a concrete pier over Lake Biwa. At their feet lay several large tubes.

There was a *bang* and several flashes of bright lights as sparks of fireworks shot out, showering the surface of the lake in colors. Then the men picked up the tubes and pointed them at the sky.

“Whoa!” Akatsuki-san’s eyes sparkled with wonder from beside me.

She was precious to me—someone I genuinely wanted to stay close with even after high school. And I was sure that she felt the same about me. But even so, I was sure I could never become a replacement for what she’d lost.

Similar to both my and Higashira’s feelings towards *him*, Akatsuki-san had similar feelings for a past companion that was irreplaceable to her too. After all, he was the only person I’d ever heard her badmouth.

There was another loud *bang*, and then a rain of colorful fireworks colored the night sky. But just as fast as it’d brightened the sky, the light faded, returning us to darkness. At that moment, I lost track of everyone else, but then I felt a tug on my shirt. Why was it that I knew who it was without even looking? Probably because, regrettably, there was no one better at finding me than *him*.

He whispered something into my ear, making me smile. I couldn’t help but feel a little envious of Akatsuki-san.

Akatsuki Minami

After they lit the second set, the night sky was once again illuminated by the fireworks that came crackling down in a shower of light. I took a peek at Yume-chan, her perfect face brightened by the fireworks.

Why did I like Yume-chan so much? Sure, she was cute and kind, but more than that, every time I stood next to her, I felt like I was being saved a little. I’d reflected on my actions and was no longer acting self-centered. I made sure to think about other people. She was always genuine and didn’t ask for anything. I knew exactly who she was. I might’ve screwed up once back in April, but that was just because I’d lost myself a little to my fantasies—not because I wanted to actually *do* anything. *All good.*

It’d be okay. This time, I wouldn’t mess up. I could behave myself as long as I tried. *This time I won’t let even a single fun day we spend together go to waste.*

“Huh? Irido-kun?”

I hadn’t noticed because he’d been in the shadows, but he was standing next to Yume-chan. I’d thought he’d be somewhere else with *him*. But there he was, standing with Yume-chan, their shoulders just

barely not touching. I suddenly felt a burst of envy, and I panicked, quickly trying to put out the fire beginning to burn inside me. *Calm yourself. Keep it under control.*

“Oh, what’s this? You want to chill with the girls? You little perv,” I said jokingly, clinging to Yume-chan’s arm.

I was able to stop myself from going too off the deep end. She wouldn’t have thought I was being too clingy if I acted like this...probably. Yume-chan wouldn’t reject me from just this. Probably.

“Sorry, Akatsuki-san.” She slipped her arm out from my grasp and gently pushed against my shoulder.

“Huh? Yume-chan...?”

“I’ll listen to your complaints as much as you want another time.” Even though she was distancing herself from me, she said this gently as if trying to cheer me up. “Do your best by yourself.”

Then I felt someone grab my hand from behind and pull me away. I knew who it was, but I didn’t care. I felt so sad as Yume-chan slowly disappeared into the crowd. Another firework went off, illuminating the area before disappearing, letting the darkness wash over the space...and me.

Mizuto Irido

“Thanks,” I said.

“Why are you thanking me? This was Kawanami-kun’s request, wasn’t it?” Yume asked pointedly.

“Just kinda felt like I should...”

I thought back to when the fireworks were going off. “Kawanami has something he needs to say to Minami-san,” I’d whispered.

“I’m surprised you were able to figure it out with what little information you had.”

“Yeah, just kinda sensed it, I guess.” I shrugged.

“You ‘sensed’ it, huh?”

I’d been wondering where one’s true self lay. People would talk about roles, personas, and masks as if the front they put on wasn’t who they truly were, but think about it. When do people use those things? Even when you’re thinking by yourself, isn’t it possible that you are simply playing the role of someone who is thinking by themself?

One’s “true self” is like one’s core. It is something you want people to understand the most, but something you can’t even find yourself. If it was to exist anywhere, at the very least...

“It wouldn’t be inside you.”

“Huh? What wouldn’t be?”

“Nothing. Just some philosophy.”

Yume giggled, her face lit up by the moonlight. “You’re kinda like that type of person Higashira-san talked about... An ‘edgelord,’ was it?”

“And this is coming from the person who had David Bowie as their ringtone in middle school?”

“Th-That’s only because it was the theme of the movie you recommended!”

Well, whatever. It was all up to the two of them now. A Read Only Member was someone who sat back and observed the progression of events, not someone who interfered. *Hm? Wait. Did we just have a normal conversation about middle school in front of— Huh?* I turned around and saw a sea of faces that I didn’t recognize.

“Uh... Where’s Higashira?”

“Huh?” Yume froze as she realized.

“I guess God put me on this earth to find lost girls at summer festivals...”

“Argh! I get it! I’m sorry! Is that enough for you?!”

Kogure Kawanami

The two of us were living in a dreamworld. We understood each other more than anyone else, were charmed by each other more than anyone else, were more loyal to each other than anyone else, and were always able to make each other laugh. A pair of people like us were too good to exist in the real world.

How many years had we been friends? I don’t remember when it started, but we had grown close enough that we were called childhood friends. What did I see in her over ten-plus years?

Was it her cuteness? Her devotion? Her humor? No, those were all nothing more than convenient masks that she’d wear for my sake! I picked out the parts of her that I wanted, making her a dreamlike person, unlike who she really was.

It was too late by the time I realized this. She’d cutely laugh and be bound by her devotion. She may have looked exactly like the very same childhood friend I knew, but I hadn’t realized that something inside her had changed. No, she hadn’t changed at all. Her true self had started poking out from behind the mask she’d been wearing. It wasn’t a sudden change or anything.

She’d always been like that; I had just been ignorant. But it became clear as day when I woke up from the dream and looked at the facts with my own two eyes. *But even so...* The night landscape of shadow and street lights spread out in front of me. It reminded me of the night of our adventure—of the night sky and the beautiful shining moon.

I’d messed up. I’d *really* messed up. I truly had no lingering

attachments. The feelings I'd felt that night were completely gone, leaving me empty, save for a sinking feeling of regret. So, I'll say it as many times as I need to.

Don't get a childhood friend. You'll never escape, even if you want to.

Don't get a childhood friend. You won't be able to hide anything anymore.

Don't get a childhood friend. Seriously, just don't. They're not as easy to forget as a dream.

Akatsuki Minami

It wasn't until we'd made it out of the crowd that I finally looked to see who'd grabbed my hand. Kogure Kawanami was standing in the dark with his patented frivolous, faint smile. I had to look away from his face that loomed about thirty centimeters above mine. But why? I didn't know, but it probably had something to do with me not feeling like I had the right to look at him.

I tried to shake my hand free. His was so much bigger than mine, big enough to envelop mine entirely. It was a nostalgic feeling that I couldn't help but remember. No matter how much I tried, though, he wouldn't let go. If anything, he held it harder.

"Wanna go for a walk?" he asked softly.

Then, he pulled me by the hand and began walking, forcing me to follow him without having even the faintest idea what was going on.

There were a lot of houses and streetlights that gave this place a feeling of being lived in. Even though we were in a completely unfamiliar area, the night sky and the distant festivities reminded me of that night during our vacation when the two of us had snuck out...whether I wanted them to or not. They also reminded me of the promise we'd made as kids that was never going to be kept.

After taking care to avoid places with people, we arrived at the lakeshore of Lake Biwa. It was a really sad place with only a few benches spread out across the concrete. Because this was a lake, there weren't any sounds of crashing waves. All that was here was a dark lake, and way in the distance, the lights from the opposite shore.

Kawanami let go of me and stuck his hand into his pocket. "Apparently there's an even bigger fireworks display at the start of August. We'd be coming back late if we did a day trip, though."

"What are you up to, Kawanami?" *There's no way he brought me to such a deserted place for just small talk, right?*

"Nothin' really, A-chan."

He's still participating in the penalty game? I know he's only been using that nickname to play along, but...

"It's just that I thought you looked like you were having a good

time.”

“Huh?”

“I figure, nobody’s gonna be around right now. We have the lake to ourselves. Isn’t that kinda exciting? Plus, it looks like the Irido siblings are off by themselves, and I bet that Higashira... Well, she’s not perceptive enough to read the room, but at the very least, she’s probably lost.”

What’s going on? We’ve been together for so long, so I should know pretty much everything about him, but I have absolutely no clue what he’s thinking.

Then I remembered back to the afternoon when he’d seen through my bad acting and silently walked away from me. I thought he’d given up on me. I was sure he’d realized that I wasn’t the same Akatsuki Minami that was “better than a girlfriend.”

“Is that uneasy look the real you? Or somethin’ you’re makin’ up?” he asked coldly, making me jump and look up at him. He was completely expressionless; the kindness that had been on his face before had vanished without a trace. “Are you the Akatsuki Minami I’ve known since we were kids? Or are you my childhood friend?”

I don’t know. Even I don’t know which I am. At first, we weren’t anything—kids who’d just learned to think who didn’t have the concept of childhood friends. We were simply together. That’s how it was supposed to be, but at a certain point, that dynamic changed.

You said I was better than a girlfriend, so I wanted to become better than a girlfriend. I wanted to become a soul mate—the kind that you see in manga and anime. That’s all I wanted. That’s really all I wanted, but...

It felt like Kawanami’s expressionless face had a darkness in it that was swallowing the shadows around us. I could feel my affectionate self and the many layers of masks I wore over my faint smile being sucked one by one away from me until the only thing left was...

“Well, I bet you don’t know.” Kawanami’s face suddenly changed into a self-deprecating smile. “There’s no way for you to know what’s genuinely you and what’s a role you’re playing. It doesn’t really matter. What’s important is that you’re having a good time, right?”

I stopped moving. His face was so bright, it looked like the sun.

“Let’s stop being stupid. I’m sorry for getting pissed off at such a small thing. I was in a bad mood. It wasn’t your fault at all.”

Stop. Don’t be nice to me.

“Gotta say, it was pretty fun, wasn’t it? Pretending to be in a relationship like that makes me know how it feels to be on the receiving side of a ROM. It is kinda embarrassing to call you ‘A-chan now’ that we’re in high school, though.”

My heart. It’s gonna thaw. I’m gonna end up taking advantage of your kindness again. I’m... I’m gonna return to how I was in middle school. I

always liked how Ko-kun was able to pick up on even the subtlest hints of my feelings.

Even if we got into a fight, he'd do his best to reconcile. Even with all of his friends, he'd know exactly when to prioritize me instead. He was thoughtful, a mood maker, and could easily blow away any negative feelings inside me. I loved him so much, it made me crazy. *But still... That's exactly why...*

"Don't apologize!!!"

Kogure Kawanami

Akatsuki's scream cut through the still air.

"Don't apologize! Blame me! It's my fault, isn't it?! It's because I'm crazy! I've never thought about what you want, right?! So why... Why are *you* the one apologizing?! I treated you so badly that you got a stomach ulcer, right?! Don't apologize! What am I supposed to do if you apologize?!"

The tears flooded out of her eyes one after another as she screamed at the top of her lungs.

"How are you such a perfect person?! Why would you come to clean my place?! You should've cut ties with me already! Even if we're in the same class and live next to each other, or if my mom asks you to, you could just ignore me! Why are you keeping up appearances?! How can you just act like nothing happened?! Why haven't you told your parents about what I did?! Tell them all about how dating me made you end up in the hospital! Your mom and dad still think we're close! It all crumbled because of *me*! Everything was my fault! It was my fault that you were hospitalized during entrance exam season, and it was my fault that you were so troubled! So why would you— How am I supposed to talk to you?! I don't know anymore! All I can do is act like I used to! Even when I caused all that trouble for Yume-chan, you covered for me! Why wouldn't you make her not ever want to be involved with me?! You know better than anyone how much of a nutjob I am! Why can't you stop involving yourself with me?!?!?"

She'd bellowed out every last thing from the bottom of her heart. Her throat had dried up, her shoulders were heaving with every breath, and she was wiping the tears off her face with her hand.

"But... Even so..." she continued in a low, pleading voice. "I don't want you to treat me like a stranger."

I knew immediately that she'd wanted to say that more than anything. Those words had come from the deepest parts of her heart. I had a hunch that they were her true feelings.

I'm her childhood friend, after all.

"You done?" I asked softly, but heard no answer. *In that case...*
"It's my turn."

“What are *you* apologizing for?!” he erupted at me, prompting me to raise my face, wet with tears. “You should be pissed! I’m the one who made you cry over and over again! We spent close to ten years together and I ended up being the one who never trusted you at all! Sure, you’re crazy! You’re a nutjob! I don’t wanna date you ever again! But I’m not much better! Ten years! Ten years we spent together, and I didn’t realize how crazy you are! I thought you were cute and kinda good to me. That’s it! That kinda dense guy is a billion times worse than you!”

This was probably the first time I’d heard him yell since that time in the hospital room. But right now, what he was yelling was the exact opposite of back then.

“I’ve wanted to apologize to you for so long! I couldn’t stop thinking about all the horrible things I said to you! But then you go off and make it seem like everything’s *your* fault?! You piss me the hell off! It makes me sick to have a girl do all the apologizing! Let me apologize a little!!!”

I felt a growl rising in my throat. *What the hell? What the hell? What the hell?!* “S-Screw you! *I’m* the one at fault! It’s all my fault! Why should you feel bad about anything?!”

“I’m saying that I’m at fault too, you idiot!”

“I’m not an idiot! I’ve always been tutoring you!”

“That just means you’re good at studying, stupid! You’re such a dumbass!”

“Shut up, idiot! You’re just a stupid softie! What the hell do you mean ‘dense guy’?! It doesn’t matter if we’re childhood friends! How are you supposed to know everything about me?! You can’t! *You’re* the victim! Why don’t you understand that?!”

“You’re just an idiot that doesn’t understand anything! You’re such an idiot!”

“Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!”

“Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! Idiot!”

We were both so ridiculous. Like, worse than elementary schoolers. We were being immature, stupid kids, but we couldn’t stop. It was like a dam had broken and all our words had come gushing out. I couldn’t stop myself from throwing every last word I could at the guy in front of me. I couldn’t think of anything else but that. I didn’t have time to play a role or put up appearances. It felt so nostalgic.

How long had it been since we’d fought like this? The last time I could remember was when he’d made fun of an anime I was watching. I started wailing and then his mom yelled at him, and in the end, we were both crying.

Or maybe the last time was when I'd beat him at a game we were playing? He didn't think I'd ever beat him, so he'd let down his guard, and I'd ended up winning. When I got really happy about it, he'd been a sore loser, and we got into a fight.

But why is it... Seriously, why is it that even though I was your girlfriend—even if it was for a short period—we never had those kinds of moments? We were just a normal, happy, fun-loving couple. We even had a lot of bittersweet memories. And yet, despite that... Why is it that only the memories of our childhood came back to me?

As we stood there, yelling at each other using the same few words over and over again, tears and snot dripping down our faces, I started to wish that I was an introverted reader like Yume-chan. Sometime during all of that, we both ran out of breath.

Our shoulders heaved as we glared at each other. Just as we were about to start up again, Ko-kun suddenly fell onto me.

“Wha— K-Ko-kun?!” E-Even if no one's around, you can't be so bold! Also, you're friggin' heavy!

It took me a bit to realize that he was putting his entire weight onto me. I held out my arms and supported him. Ko-kun was surprisingly fit despite being slender and so warm... *Wait, warm?*

I looked at his face and saw that he was sweating bullets. His face had gone pale from the heat. I hesitantly looked at his arms and saw hives, just as I'd expected.

“K-Ko-kun?! This entire time, you were—”

“Sorry, but could you not call me that right now?”

I shut my mouth in a panic. He wasn't a mind reader, so his weird allergy or PTSD or whatever wasn't triggered when he *sensed* romantic feelings from someone...but he could probably figure it out after all that screaming. My feelings for him were still inside me.

Who ever said that girls overwrite memories while guys save them under a different name? That's not true at all. There are way too many memories; it'd take forever to overwrite all of them. I've heard that time passes faster the older you get. That means, internally, years are shorter the older you are, and much longer the younger you are. If that's the case, then it'd take longer than my entire life to overwrite the ten years of memories I made as a child. How could I forget any of them? Even if things ended in the worst way possible, we'd still have been childhood friends.

“Being childhood friends with you was hell, but...” Ko-kun whispered into my ear through ragged breaths. “Remember when we made that Rube Goldberg machine for our summer homework?”

“Yeah...”

“Remember when we went all the way to the mountains for that mobile game that uses your location?”

“Yeah...”

“And our family vacation when we snuck out at night?”

“Yeah...”

“That was all really fun...”

“Yeah...”

That was all before we had any awareness of being a guy or a girl. It was when we were neither childhood friends nor a couple.

“We have so many memories together... So many it’s almost annoying, but just because things didn’t work out when we were dating... Should all those memories really become hell? Thinking like that...” I could hear his ragged breaths clearly. “It’s so lonely...” His voice shook. Tears were streaming down his face. I’d never heard him sound so vulnerable before.

When was the last time he cried? I seriously can’t remember.

“A-chan...”

“What...?”

“Do you... Do you remember our promise?” Suddenly, all the strength left his body at the same time he said that.

I stood my ground, holding him tightly so he wouldn’t fall. We’d made that promise when we were the same height, but now he was thirty centimeters taller than I. He’d grown so big that I could barely hold him up, even though we used to run around together as kids. But the sky still shone like it had back then.

“I remember, Ko-kun...” *Of course I remember. Do you think I’d ever let you forget?*



Kogure Kawanami

“You’re finally awake.”

I slowly opened my eyes to the tired voice above me. A-chan was looking down at my face with the starry sky as a backdrop. I felt the sensation of hardwood against my back and a soft something supporting my head. In all likelihood, my head was on her thighs. Apparently I’d been arranged to use her lap as a pillow while lying on the bench.

“How long was I out?”

“Probably thirty minutes or so. Kinda hard to know without my phone.”

“Ah... No wonder it’s cold.” I shivered.

Even though it was summertime, sleeping outside for thirty minutes was enough to make someone cold. At the very least, both my fever and nausea had mostly subsided.

“If you’re better now, could you get off of me? My legs are asleep.”

“That right? I’d be happy to. They weren’t very comfortable anyway— OW!” I yelped as the thighs that’d been supporting my head suddenly disappeared from underneath me, leaving my head to smack against the bench.

While I groaned in agony, I couldn’t help but be surprised by how soft her thighs had become. She must’ve gotten some muscle. Or maybe all the fat that was supposed to go to her boobs went to her thighs instead. *Oh, now you decide to develop into the kind of girl I like.* I sat up in an effort to clear my mind of the sensation I’d just felt.

“Shouldn’t you be nicer? I’m hurtin’ here.”

“I don’t care. Why don’t you get a girlfriend who’s nice to you? Shouldn’t be hard since you’re Mr. Popular.”

“What the hell’s your problem? If my body wasn’t like this, I’d have already—”

“Sorry,” Akatsuki said sharply.

“What? Got somethin’ you wanna say?”

“Nope. I’m just sorry that I got in the way of your high school harem life.”

Harem? I’m not that popular. That’s really what you think of me? Then I remembered her words: “I don’t want you to treat me like a stranger.”

I remembered back to when Akatsuki was crying her eyes out. When she had been wailing at me, I hadn’t realized that my allergy symptoms had started. That meant that she...you know. That meant that her current jealous attitude was...

“Hey, you...” I started grumbling as I felt hives surfacing across my arm. “I’m still recovering. Can’t you hold back a little?”

Plus, I could feel my head getting hot. *Wait...* Up until now, I’d never felt hot in my head or face before during these episodes. Or maybe I just never noticed. This *had* to be a part of my allergic reaction. It had to!

“Pfft!” Akatsuki snorted, her shoulders shaking with laughter.

Huh...? What’s going on? I can’t keep up with this. Akatsuki spun around to face me, and I saw that she was wearing a devilish smile. “How’s my acting?”

“Huh...?”

“Oh, what’s this? You’re kinda red. I just pretended to be a teensy bit jealous, but that’s enough to make you blush? You think too highly of yourself, Ko-kun!”

“Ahhhh!!!” She’d set me up. How could she do that in this situation? *What a bitch!*

“Want to rest your head on my thighs again, Ko-kun? C’mon go right ahead.”

“Stop!!!”

I felt regret in the deepest level of my core. How could I have dated this girl? That was, without doubt, the biggest failure of my life. I will repeat this as many times as necessary, as if it’s my mantra—never *ever* date your childhood friend.

“Um... Could I possibly interject?” A familiar voice drifted through the darkness, startling the crap out of us.

The moonlight faintly highlighted the figure of our classmate. There was no mistaking it—standing there was Isana Higashira. She was usually not one to have expressions on her face, but right now she was wearing an *extremely* annoying shit-eating grin.

“I do so apologize for interrupting your flirting; however, could either of you possibly direct me towards the temple? I’d be very grateful.”

“Hi-Higashira-san... How long have you been here?” Akatsuki asked.

“From when you offered him another chance to lay on your lap, b-but fear not! I’m not one to spread rumors! Although I *am* quite loose-lipped!”

“You’re definitely gonna tell Yume-chan and Irido-kun! St-Stop! It was a joke! It was just a joke!!!”

Mizuto Irido

The study camp had concluded, and we were put back on the buses, separated by class. Higashira looked extremely sad, but there wasn’t much that could be done since we were in different classes.

She'd just have to make do with having her phone back.

Minami-san took a seat in the back while Kawanami headed to an aisle seat.

"Huh, Minami-san, you're not gonna sit next to Kawanami-kun?" one of the girls teased.

This hasn't run its course yet? I'd assumed it was done yesterday, but now I felt bad since it seemed like it'd continue into summer break.

"Oh, we broke up!" Minami-san said nonchalantly.

"Ha ha ha!"

"What? Why?"

"Hm... Irreconcilable differences?"

"What are you, a band?!"

"Aha ha ha ha!"

"Aw, Kawanami, how's it feel to be dumped?"

"I can finally be a normal guy again."

"What are you, an idol?!"

"Aha ha ha!"

Wow, they're good. With that, they had definitely put this to rest. This joke was dead in the water, meaning they wouldn't have to be bothered by it anymore. In the midst of my admiration, I heard a notification pop up on my phone. It was from Yume.

Yume: It looks like everything went well between the two of them.

Mizuto: Yep, looks like it.

Yume: I heard from Higashira-san that the two of them were apparently flirting in a deserted area. Maybe they're actually dating now?

Mizuto: Possibly.

Yume: Aren't you curious?

Mizuto: Not at all.

This little episode had made it clear to me that I had absolutely no interest in being a ROM.

"Heya, bestie!" A guy called out before sitting next to me. It goes without saying that it was Kogure Kawanami.

"Who're you calling 'bestie'? You're the type of guy who'd rescue me from bullying. A bestie would just join in."

"I have no clue what you mean, but in any case, I wouldn't rescue you. I'd prevent it from happening in the first place." He grinned. "So, hey... Thanks for last night. I appreciate your help."

"You're the one who started it and saw it through to the end."

In actuality, I didn't know what exactly had happened between

Kawanami and Minami-san. I only kinda sensed that their relationship was heading in a bad direction and knew that someone as tactful as he could probably solve it, so I gave him that necessary push. It seemed like it worked out thanks to his social abilities—actually, no. This had nothing to do with his social abilities. At any rate, Kogure Kawanami had solved it with his own strength.

“So, mind if I ask you a question then, Irido?”

“What?”

“Where’d you go off to last night with Irido-san?”

“...” I did my best not to freeze up.

I could see Kawanami’s creepy grin from his reflection in the bus window.

“The two of you went back to the hotel. I thought you’d be out there looking for Higashira... Why’d you go back?”

“We thought Higashira might’ve gone back too.”

“All right, follow-up question. Why were the two of you in tracksuits?”

“We took a bath.”

“Even though Higashira was lost? I know how protective you are of Higashira, so something doesn’t add up.”

“...”

“What I think it means is that something happened between the two of you that forced you to take a bath. Maybe something that had you...drenched in water?”

I exhaled. How could this guy be so perceptive and yet get into a fight with Minami-san?

“I’m just shootin’ out theories, so you can ignore me. But you know what, I don’t think it rained yesterday, which means if you both got soaked, it only could’ve been if you both fell into water... Maybe a lake or something? Lake Biwa isn’t very well illuminated, so maybe while you were looking for Higashira, you slipped and...”

I *didn’t slip*. All I did was try to save that idiot from falling in, but I somehow managed to get dragged in too.

“Oh, right! And Irido-san was wearing white yesterday. You know the fun thing about white clothes? They become transparent when wet.”

Yeah, and they stick to the skin, revealing all sorts of colors that were supposed to be hidden by the clothes—the color of her skin, blue cloth, and...red. Even though it had been dark, it had been easy to tell that she was blushing as she tried to cover her chest.

“It’d make sense that you’d have to go back to the hotel at that point. But that leaves one problem: you couldn’t walk into the hotel drenched. You needed a place to take off and wring out your clothes first.”

“Shut up.” I rammed my elbow into his side.

“Gah!”

I thought you were only supposed to observe as a ROM, not talk about things you didn't even see. Thinking about it, I was kinda pissed off, because this made it seem like Kawanami knew us better than we knew ourselves.

Suddenly, Yume's words from last night echoed in my head.

“Don't you dare look over here...”

Those who watch force their own desires onto those who are being watched. Those who are being watched fool themselves into believing convenient lies. There's always a difference between your ideal self and your real self. That's why only you know who you truly are.

Humans have two eyes in order to properly perceive objects. Maybe we need two eyes to properly judge the shape of our hearts too. We need two eyes to see our values, prejudices, and desires that we can only see with the one eye in our heart.

But if the true self I found within me wasn't someone who could help me achieve what I wanted, would I think about changing? Well, I guess inadequate ideas are worse than none at all. *If I ever do encounter that situation, I think I'll choose the more fun option.*

Afterword: Real, Fake, and Manufactured

When I was in middle school, there was this really funny guy. Now, he wasn't the leader or anything of the popular group he was in, but he got a lot of laughs. He was the class clown. From my perspective as a light novel otaku, he seemed right in his element at school.

But one day, he suddenly stopped coming to school. Our homeroom teacher told us that acting like someone he wasn't had taken a toll on him. Honestly, now that I think about it, it was pretty tactless of the teacher to disclose such a private matter to everyone in the class, but I'll leave that outrage for another time. I still vividly remember the reaction of the class. We were speechless.

The group that he'd hung out with had absolutely no clue about his struggles. Everyone plays a role, but no one was really aware of his. They had no idea what toll it had taken on him. The entire time, he was forcing himself to be someone he wasn't. Why? Because those were the expectations pushed onto him by the group.

Humans are, by nature, creatures that play a character to match the expectations of the people around them. Just as there are people who find it difficult to do that, there are people who can do it as easily as they breathe. There are also people who see this as growth, and others who see it as submission. Either way, though, there's no escaping the observer effect.

Since this volume features the self-proclaimed ROM expert, Kogure Kawanami, there was no way I could pass up the opportunity to talk about this. Sure, he's a very talkative person and not *really* a ROM expert, but I wanted to show that how someone perceives you is strongly affected by your own actions. Without that, it'd be hard to understand Mizuto and Yume's circumstances.

It was fun to explore what kind of roles two people who first saw each other as family and then as exes would make for themselves. But next volume, we'll return to our roots and focus on the relationship between Mizuto and Yume.

A very big and heartfelt thanks to my editor, the illustrator, TakayaKi, everyone involved with this book, and everyone who's been supporting this series!

This has been Kyosuke Kamishiro's *My Stepmom's Daughter is My*

Ex: "Childhood Friends No More."

Truth be told, I generally write the opposite of what I want to say in a conspicuous place.



My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex 3

Childhood Friends No More™





"What the hell, Irido?! Who's Tits Magoo over here?! What's she doing in this sanctuary for you and Irido-san?!"

"How did this happen?"

"Akatsuki-san, please help!"

"Heya, Yume-chan! I'm here to save you!"

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He watches over the relationship between Yume and Mizuto. A self-proclaimed "Romance ROM Expert."

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She successfully pulled off her glow-up by becoming a beautiful honor student. Mizuto's ex and his stepbrother.

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Yume's ex and now stepbrother. Dotes on Isana as his best friend.

"Who is this frivolous-looking person? This must be some kind of practical joke! I'm your friend, right?!"

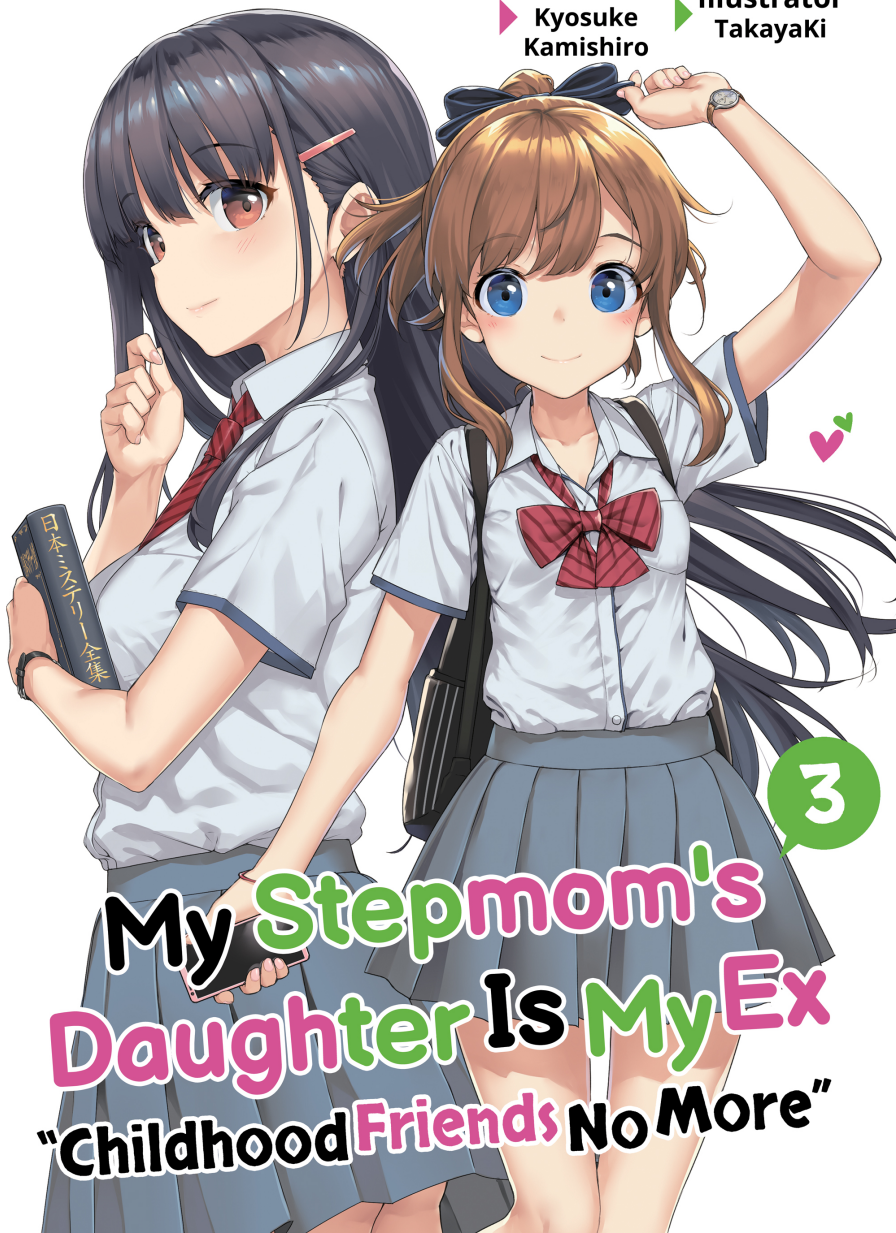
Her sharp voice rang out, prompting me to glance at her. As I did, I saw her taking off her black thigh-high socks. Huh? What's she doing? Her long, bare, porcelain legs were in full view.

"Hey."



Author
Kyosuke
Kamishiro

Illustrator
TakayaKi



My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex "Childhood Friends No More"



My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex 3

Childhood Friends No More™





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by Kyosuke Kamishiro

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